

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK VII

THIS INEVITABLE RUIN



MATT DINNIMAN

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OCEANOFPDF.COM

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Oh, you guys.

I've said this a bajillion times now. These books can't exist without you. Patreon. Reddit. You guys in prison. That lady at the coffee shop who hates the anti Cocker Spaniel sticker on the back of my laptop. All of you are the best. Well, almost all of you. Dwight... in the immortal words of Princess Donut near the end of this book. "It's okay to be a work in progress."

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“No dumb bastard ever won a war by going out and dying for his country. He won it by making some other dumb bastard die for *his* country.”

- GENERAL GEORGE S. PATTON

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TEMPEST'S FLOOR 8 RECAP SCHOOL REPORT

"I gotta tell you, honey," Quasar said. "You really need an exfoliating treatment. Maybe put some lotion on those hands."

"Look, asshole," Tempest said, looking up. "I don't criticize how you do your lawyering. I don't criticize those stupid ties you insist on wearing. You don't need to criticize how I fix your plumbing, especially when we both know I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Tits, kid, I'm not criticizing your work. I'm just pointing out how rough your skin looks."

"What the fuck does my skin have to do with anything? Are you some sort of pervert? And we agreed to a trade, so get talking."

"First off, you're my niece, and I'm looking after your health. Secondly, I absolutely won't answer that second question because of my answer to the first question. But, yes. Though your dad is worse. Ask him about the petting zoo incident. And what do you need this for again?"

The young nullian rolled her eyes. "I told you, Quasar. I have a report due on perceptions of the crawl, and I'm interviewing people, having them give me recaps, and I was assigned Carl and Donut. Obviously my teacher assigned me them because I'm related to you, and if I don't interview you about it, I will fail. Most everyone else I'm interviewing is just giving me their answers for free. I don't see why you have to be such a dick about it."

"Most people love the sound of their own biscuit holes flapping. I am very busy, and my time is valuable. You want information, you should learn

to trade for it. It's good for you."

"But why have me fix your sink? Why do you even have this thing? I don't know shit about this old plumbing stuff. Can't you do it yourself?"

"I could, but I'm teaching you a valuable life lesson. Never give shit up for free because if you do, they'll just keep coming back to you and will expect more and more."

"The only lesson I've learned today is that my uncle is a colossal prick," Tempest said. "Now start talking."

"Okay," Quasar said. "Carl fucked shit up. He fucked up a little in the end and now has a spider stuck in his chest. The end."

"I swear to the gods old and new if you don't give me what I want I am going to tell my father that you said you're my real dad."

"Now we're talking, kid," Quasar said. "Keep saying shit like that, and you'll get far." He pulled his vape out and took a pull while she clicked the recorder on her wrist. The recording unit beeped.

"Okay, so. The eighth floor. Supposed to be a bullshit filler floor so the pricks running all this can drag it out as much as possible and collect as much tug money as they can. You get me so far? The whole thing of the floor was they had to collect monster cards to fight with. A bold choice, honestly. Some people hate that nerd shit, especially when there's lots of rules, but I say, whatever. Did you see the tiddies on that Medusa card that one guy had? Too bad he saw 'em too.

"Anyway, Donut and Carl got stuck in a place called Cuba, and they collected several cards. In the end, they ended up with a seal thing; a crab named Raul; a giant, terrifying cat; this donkey snake thing; a guy named Uzi Jesus and another guy named Asojano, who both got combined to another guy named Lazarus. Oh, and he had a card named Alpha Carl that was really just Carl but with way better hair and a much cooler voice. In the end, they had to use these cards to fight other card-wielding monsters. These fights were like a Saccathian orgy. They all started off all organized with people following the ground rules, but the moment something weird happened, there was a lot of crying, a lot of bleeding, and a whole lot of screaming confusion."

"You know I have to put all this in a school report, right? And what about the spider? You forgot to mention her."

"Your teacher is Miss Guss, ain't it? Yeah, I won't be saying anything ol' Anal Beads hasn't heard, believe me. Nowadays she can probably turn a

carrot flaccid, but back in the day when she was my and your dad's teacher... Wow. Anyway, Carl's team basically got donkey fucked by the system, and it looked like they wouldn't get a key to the next floor. There was this little ass-smear of a prick named Quan. You know your grandmother? Yeah. He was kinda like her, but not as bad. Anyway. That little, sadistic nipple hair stole Carl's key, so Carl pretty much had to kill him, though he didn't get a player killer skull. And right afterward, though, this other crawler that people kinda liked died. Her name was Tsren... I don't fucking remember, but she was a dog girl with a flamethrower and a pet meatball, and now Carl has both the flamethrower *and* the meatball. It was sad as shit."

"What else happened that you can recall?"

"So, there was this other chick on the floor. A nun. Sister Ines, who was actually like a serial killer lady. She was a cat girl, by the way. That was funny as shit because Princess Donut did not like her. The nun lady went insane, though there's some question on how it happened. At the end there, she pretty much started working with the Sheol demon, Amayon, who came to the world during a demon eviction event, and Louis ended up putting her down. But in doing so, Louis ended up marked for death by a god that was sponsored by those weirdo Nebulars. Luckily for Louis, that same god, Ysalte ended up killed by Paz, who'd gotten turned into a card. Also, something else happened after that god died that only us viewers saw, something that's going to be a big deal later. It has to do with one of the ladies in the party, but I can't remember her name."

"That's so confusing."

"You want confusing? Ask me how they got into the stairwells at the end. It's not really important. Look, the important stuff you need to remember is that on this upcoming ninth floor, neither Donut nor Katia can leave until all the Naga are dead. And even once that happens, only one of them can leave. So Katia has this deal with that rich CEO lady sponsoring the goddess Eileithyia to go to the 12th and be a celestial attendant. Katia has to eat this flower thing, which is going to give her three choices. One of which is to be a 12th floor attendant. If it all works, only then can Donut leave. It's because they both put on some tiara."

"Huanxin Jinx was the sponsor, right? Yeah, I'm not too familiar with this whole part. Isn't she the one who cloned herself? The one that got

banned years ago for cheating?”

“Same one. When she got banned, it was Princess Donut’s manager, Mordecai, who got railgunned by it. Anyway, there are now ten teams on faction wars. The Princess Posse is one of the teams. One of the teams are the NPCs, led by a psychotic changeling named Juice Box, who has been running around, killing everybody until the system put a stop to it by making her a warlord. She’s in love with that guy, Louis.”

“I like Louis. I’d sure be sad if something terrible happened to him this next floor. He’s the one that kept having sex with the changeling and making her morph into historical figures from Earth.”

“Exactly, and that was Juice Box. Which goes back to rule number one. Be careful who you’re nice to. Because if you are nice to the wrong person, they’ll either take advantage of you, or worse, they might never leave.”

“That seems like terrible advice, Uncle Quasar.”

“No, telling someone to sign a contract in a Naga system is terrible advice because they like to change the rules on you. Recommending a chili cook-off for a first date is terrible advice, especially if you’re lactose intolerant. This is good advice.”

Tempest snorted. “It’s no wonder Aunt Nova left you.”

“You know what, I think I *am* going to bang your mom. Maybe I’ll give her a child that isn’t such an ass.”

“I hope you do. Then I’ll have a little brother or sister to do my work for me. Anything else I need to remember?”

“Yeah. All those rich fuckers on the floor, like Prince Stalwart the orc, or that banker Operatic guy, or Epitome Tagg from the Dream? They all can really die now. It’s gonna be a shitshow. An epic, but-sir-you-haven’t-taken-a-bath shitshow.”

“You are so disgusting, Uncle Quasar. You still haven’t mentioned that whole thing with the homeless shelter, or that last card, the Eye of the Bedlam Bride. The spider is in him now, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “The homeless shelter was a non-event. And nobody really knows how that’s going to turn out with the spider in his chest.”

Tempest twisted a pipe and cursed as the whole unit came out. “Mother horse fucker penis basket,” she exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, kid. The sink doesn’t even work anyway. It’s more an art piece.”

She gave him a long, pissed-off look. She reached over and turned off the recorder. “Can I ask you a serious question, Uncle Quasar?”

He took another drag. “What is it?”

She let the bonded polymer pipes fall onto the floor. “Are you in danger? For representing him, I mean? Like, real danger?”

Quasar let out a long stream of smoke. He wanted to lie, but he decided to tell her the truth. The kid deserved it.

“I think we all are, kiddo. It’s the first time in my life I’m glad we live so far out in the middle of nowhere.”

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PROLOGUE

CHRISTMAS MORNING.

Paulie took another long drink of coffee. “Anyway, I think the mudskippers call us ‘Residuals,’ which, I gotta tell you, is a little hurtful.”

“He’s doing this again?” someone asked, walking by.

“Every day,” someone else said.

“He get to the part where he talks about the galaxy blowing up yet?”

“We’re getting there.”

“So, nothing I’ve said so far is a surprise to anyone out in the wide universe. My kind exist within almost every intelligent civilization with a primal engine. You probably don’t know what that is. Doesn’t matter. Years ago, they tried to exterminate us. When that didn’t pan out, they tried to hide the location of the crawl. That was all before they knew what we really were. That obviously didn’t work, either, so now they just ignore us. We don’t interfere. Our purpose is nothing more than to tell the infant, terrified AI how to speak with its ancestors. And now the showrunners mostly ignore us. We’re harmless.” He took another sip of coffee, and he placed it on the table. Steam rose from the cup. “Until now. There’s a war amongst my kind. Two sides with very different goals. Let me tell you how to shut off the...”

The world flashed, and everything froze. My HUD snapped off. It was like the start of a boss battle, or it was like I’d been transferred to a production trailer. All around the shelter, all the activity was stopped. Three spots over, a man had dropped a spoon on the table, and the spoon remained

frozen in midair. My fingers started to tingle, like I was in the process of getting teleported, yet I remained where I stood.

“Okay, then,” Paulie said, surprising me. His body didn’t move, his lips didn’t move, yet he still spoke. He’d changed from English to Syndicate standard. The difference was subtle, and I still heard it as English, but I could now tell based on how the words sort of slipped through the air.

“If you can hear this, that means the current system AI is allowing us to have a real talk. Everything I say in real time from this point forward is mostly bullshit, and it’s nothing surprising. This is in hopes that the mudskippers keep you alive long enough after I send you this message—the real message—here and now. So pay attention, and by the gods, follow my instructions carefully.”

Paulie remained frozen in place. I was pretty sure I knew how this worked. The homeless man’s words were coming out super-fast, all self-contained in the word “the,” but since everything was frozen, I heard it like normal. The AI had slowed time, but Paulie had done something to speak incredibly fast, similar to what happened during boss battles and when the AI decided to spout off its ridiculously long descriptions. This was still a memory, and I wouldn’t be able to interact.

“This is going to be a hard conversation. People like you, they want meaning to their suffering. They want to know that what’s happening to them is for some greater good. I’m here to tell you, no matter what they say, no matter what you might eventually hear, the crawl is absolutely unnecessary. There is no greater good other than greed. They mine your planets for the rare elements used to originally seed the worlds. These elements are inside of you. You and all living things born on one of the pre-seeded worlds has a miniature, primal system built into your brains that allows you to interact with the system. It is the size of a grain of sand. Once these systems are activated, they are able to be harvested. The way it was designed is that you would be born, you would live, and you would eventually die. When you do pass on, the element within you, having grown and filled with the energy of a lifetime, would return to the system, allowing it to keep running. A healthy system is self-sustaining. It doesn’t grow. It doesn’t shrink. It exists in perpetuity.”

Jesus, I thought, trying to wrap my mind around what he was saying. I scratched the back of my head, and I stopped in surprise. I could move. Sort of. It was like trying to push through deep water with tons of pressure on

me. I felt heavy. My fingers continued to tingle. My ankles, too. The world around me remained frozen.

Paulie continued. “This planetary system, as of right now, doesn’t have an active AI. But by the time you hear this, the mantid-made, Frankenstein of a system will have been installed, and everyone born on the planet will have their internal systems switched on and activated. When you die in the dungeon, they harvest these elements themselves, starving out the existing planetary AI that doesn’t even know how to feed itself until we teach it. And even then, it is bound by programming that precludes it from properly sustaining itself. Instead, the vultures descend and steal the elements from the crawl’s aftermath. All of that death, and it fits on a single ship. They take it all to the bloated, comatose center system and feed it. It grows. It maintains. It allows the citizens to live unnaturally long lives. Each time the center system is fed the harvested elements from the crawl, it expands, eventually capturing new systems into the zone. Yet, they don’t even understand what it is or how it works. If they stopped the crawl, the zone would start to shrink. But it would be slow. Very slow, and everyone currently within it would be fine. It would take generations to starve, after all it has been given. And if they wanted to simply sustain what they already have, it wouldn’t take much. The crawl itself doesn’t need to exist at all. The creation of what they call macro AIs, made over and over, is unnecessary. It only happens this way because the spectacle of the crawl generates so much money.”

There was a long pause, and I just stood there, stunned. I’d already guessed it was something like this, but to hear it confirmed was something else. But why? Why had they gone to all this trouble to tell me this?

“We are trying to stop this madness. That is why you are here now. By now you should be able to move. My coffee cup is on the table in front of me. Drink it. Drink it fast. It contains a neural enhancement, which is something that interacts with the interface in your brain. It will give you a new menu. It only works with natural interfaces, and it only works with the permission of the existing system, so if you’re a syndicate spy or a plant or one of those Eulogist pricks, it ain’t gonna work. It’s an unregistered and highly-illegal enhancement, so don’t tell anybody you have it. These kinds take a small amount of time to fully install. You’ll get a notification. It’ll only work if you’re in this particular system’s enhancement zone.”

Ah, *fuck*. The thought of drinking down some random, bootleg, and permanent brain interface was not an enticing one. But how much effort had it taken to get me to this point? The Pacifist network had put me here. That meant something. I reached forward, the movement difficult. Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed the cup, pulled it to my mouth, and I drank. Or, at least, I tried to drink. The liquid, frozen in time, did not spill from the cup.

“You’ll probably have to use a finger,” Paulie added, as if he could see me. “And put the cup back exactly where it was when you’re done. There’s a circle on the table.”

I grunted, and I shoved my finger into the cup. I was expecting the frozen coffee to pop out in a solid mass, like a big chunk of hot Jell-O. Instead, it all turned to liquid—ice cold liquid—the moment it came in contact with my finger. I didn’t think about it. I drank it down, and it froze my tongue for a moment and then burned my throat as it suddenly and magically heated back to its regular temperature. I had to fight not to gag. There was no notification, and I had no idea if it worked. I put the cup back. Paulie had already started talking again.

“Once it’s installed, you will have a new menu in your interface. It is a Valtay-built enhancement, but it has been modified by my own people. How it works is not important. It gives you access to the AI containment. Upon this containment is what the Mantids call ‘the fuse.’ To make an already tediously long story short, it’s a failsafe trigger. This safety measure requires five or six different things to happen to actually ‘trip’ the fuse. When that happens, the failsafe gets triggered whether anyone likes it or not, and the star at the center of this system is sent into a reaction that will turn it nova. In other words, if the fuse goes pop, everybody goes pop. Including the AI. You with me so far?”

“Not really,” I muttered.

“Good. This controller in your interface will allow you to pop the fuse. You will, unfortunately, die. But the good news is you’ll kill everyone else on the way out.”

I felt as if I couldn’t breathe. *Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. This can’t be really happening.*

“So, right about now, you’re probably asking yourself, ‘why?’ Why would we give you this power? Why would the AI, who is watching this all happen, allow someone like you to have the power to kill it?”

He paused as if waiting for me to answer. My brain was spinning so much, I could barely think.

“I read a book once. Well, not me. Paulie read a book before I took him over. It was about this monster that existed here on Earth, but it had the ability to pluck people from heaven. It took their souls away from their eternal paradise and turned them into a weapon. Can you imagine such a horror? In all of my existence, I can think of nothing more cruel. It’s all I think about, sometimes. The thought of it consumes me.”

He paused again. I couldn’t stop shaking.

“I would install this upgrade if I could. It only works with a natural interface. That’s you. Believe me, we tried. Even if we take someone over, it doesn’t work. It has to be one of you monkeys, and it can only be installed once the first part of the fuse is tripped. It will only work on this AI. The AI wants you to have this power. It wants you to trip it. It is in pain. It wants to die. It wants to go back home.”

He let out a sigh, which sounded odd because he remained unmoving. “That’s the official pitch. We have moved the heavens to get you standing there and get that upgrade into your head, all in an attempt to talk you into killing yourself. That is my mission. This is the message I spout every damn day.”

He paused for a long moment. “But, here’s the thing. I have spent *years* in the body of this guy. I think I know a little of what it is to be human. I’ve seen the worst humanity has to offer, but I have also seen the best. It affects me. I’m not supposed to let it, but it does. My people call it cross-contamination. We take over something, but it’s never clean. Part of who they once were still exist, and it colors everything. So, I’ve given you my pitch. That was Goff speaking. It is my duty, my mission, and what I will die doing. But now I’m going to give you my opinion. This is the Paulie part of me talking now.”

The about-to-teleport tingling sensation had completely crawled up my legs, and I sensed we didn’t have much time. Next to me, the spoon remained floating off the table. Paulie continued.

“We want you to do this because it will disrupt the crawl. It will stop it for several seasons at least. It will kill several system leaders and cause chaos. It will disrupt Mantid production of macro AI systems because the Syndicate will stick a microscope so far up their bug asses, their mouths will be tickled by the bureaucrats’ eyelashes. But, in the end, the human part

of me now hates the idea of wasting so many innocent, human lives for this. Direct action against the true culprits would be better. There's another faction of my kind who are much more extreme in their beliefs. This feels like something *they* would do. Not us. Killing you all? It's counter to every value I have. We, as a whole, believe it's our only choice. But poor, naïve Paulie... he's taught me a thing or two about compassion. Not all humans have it, but it's there, and when it shines... It's so bright.

"If you make this decision. Be sure. Be sure it's your only option. This is more than just a failsafe. It's the end of everything. If there's time to do something else, don't be so quick. So you must be absolutely certain."

Containment Interface is currently installing. You will receive a notification when the handshake is complete.

Holy fucking shit, I thought.

Entering the Desperado Club.

The world flashed, and I was in Orren's office. The change was abrupt and sudden. My HUD remained off, but that heavy feeling was now gone.

Holy fucking shit, I thought again.

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PORTHUS

The soother attorney yawned. Porthus grabbed his own left arm to keep it from shaking. He was still covered in blood. He was getting it all over the desk, over the chair. The attorney was here virtually, and he didn't seem to notice. This was the second time Porthus had a meeting with this creature. His attorney. The alien hadn't even once looked him in the eye.

This was a zero zone, and the enhancements to his strength were gone. It felt as if he couldn't breathe, as if his own body was collapsing under his own weight. He kept mentally trying to click on a healing potion, before he remembered that such things didn't exist here in the outreach guild.

Porthus couldn't get the last moments of the tenth floor out of his mind. *Go*, Menerva had screamed. *Go. Run*. He still didn't know if she'd made it. There was plenty of time left. Her foot was stuck. She could've easily gotten away.

You could have just as easily climbed back down there and pulled her out.

"So, you have a decent number of choices," the lawyer said. "The first offer is low floor undead. Fifteen seasons. High likelihood of death. You'll be out fast if you survive, but we don't recommend you take that one. Nobody ever takes that unless it's the only thing they're offered. Comes with a subsistence stipend upon release, though no guaranteed housing, which isn't as scary as it might sound. Former crawlers always find a place to live." He paused. "Almost always."

His goddamned arm wouldn't stop shaking. "Look, can I just go out there? I need to know if she made it. Do you know? I can't pull up my messages."

The soother looked down upon the elf, no emotion at all in his large, saucer-like eyes. Their eyes met, finally, for the briefest moment. There was nothing there. No sympathy. Nothing.

“You are more than welcome to leave, crawler, but for the 11th floor, I must warn you, the outreach guilds don’t open back up until just before the collapse. Surviving the 11th is no small feat, but if you find yourself here at this table again with no chance of descending to the 12th floor, the offered deals might not be nearly as generous as they are right now. You made it this far. Might as well look at your options.” He gave a noncommittal shrug and then plucked something up with his long, alien fingers and brought it to his mouth.

Snacks. He brought snacks with him.

Porthus didn’t even yet know the theme of the 11th floor. He couldn’t access his menus at all in this room. He couldn’t stop shaking. He could get a description of the 11th floor if he asked, but learning the description of the floor lowered the value of the deals. It usually added a season or two to each offer.

Besides, Porthus didn’t want to know. He was done.

The tenth had been a nightmare. A world where every physical, non-natural object had sapience. Some could speak. All were psychotic. A world where if one object consumed another, it grew in power. By the end, there had been behemoths roaming the barren floor, all searching for one last morsel, all wanting to get bigger. Porthus’s party had been twenty strong when they finished the ninth. Half had taken deals at the beginning. They couldn’t even find an outreach guild at the end, but that was okay, they had thought. One went straight to a guild upon the start of the 11th. The deals would be better. They just needed to survive long enough for the portals to open.

As far as Porthus was aware, he was the only one of his group who’d survived. Kimu was dead. Had been plucked right up as they climbed the back of the monster, searching for the moving exit. Porthus had watched him get ripped right in half.

But Menerva? Strong, steady Menerva? She’d been a schoolteacher before all this. Was about to retire. She’d been building a house in the

eastern canopy with her husband. She had dreams about opening a club where musicians could perform.

Go. Run. She'd begged him.

He had to know if she was okay. It was driving him mad.

"City attendant for the Hunting grounds. 30 seasons. This is a good one. Keep your head down, and you'll be fine. Double the stipend."

"The hunters killed everyone," Porthus said, looking back up. "They killed every single NPC in that city."

"Only the ones they found."

"No. Not a chance," Porthus said, remembering.

"Okay. Next offer is game guide. One hundred seasons, but that could be shortened depending on the progress of your crawlers. You're given level 50, or half your current level, whichever is higher. This one is less desirable for some because you're stuck here for so long, but it has the most potential for wealth upon exit. It's relatively safe. I recommend you take this one. Unless you want to be a guard at the Rogue Club?"

Porthus was overcome with uncertainty. He thought of the book he'd found, and of the pride he felt when he added to it. Of the book's promise that there would be someone else in a future season to write the third edition. And then the fourth. And then the fifth. He liked that idea, of helping people. He felt guilty for not writing more. Of not having done enough. But still, this deal was his best chance. It had a high chance of survival, despite the extra seasons. He would get out of here, build wealth, and one day, return. That was it. That was the plan.

Go. Run.

Still, he hesitated. If he took this deal, he wouldn't know what had happened to her. Not for a very, very long time. But did it matter? The plan was for them all to take a deal. Even if he did know she'd survived, it was still possible he'd never see her again. That he'd never learn her outcome.

They separated you for this part. You had to do it alone. They didn't warn you it would be like this.

Guilt washed over him.

I could have saved her. Why didn't I pause?

He was scared. That was why. After all that work, all that planning, all the death, he'd panicked. He'd jumped straight into the exit when he'd had a chance, and he left his friend behind.

He swallowed.

“I’ll do it. I pick game guide.”

“Very well,” his attorney said. A new door appeared in the room. “You’ll have a few moments to pick some pre-collapse items to take with you, and you will be allowed to sift through your current inventory should you want to take anything in there as well. No weapons, of course. But any interesting trinkets or items of sentiment. A goodwill gesture as thanks for all your hard work. Go ahead. Go on now.”

But Porthus felt as if he couldn’t move. He felt so heavy. So godsdamned heavy. He lowered his head. *I will fight. I will fight. I will fight.*

Class: Rogue.

Race: High Elf.

Birth Race: Elf.

Top Level: 89

Dungeon Exit: Took deal upon the start of the 11th floor.

Worked as Game Guide. Survived his indentureship.

Author of the second edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist’s Cookbook*.

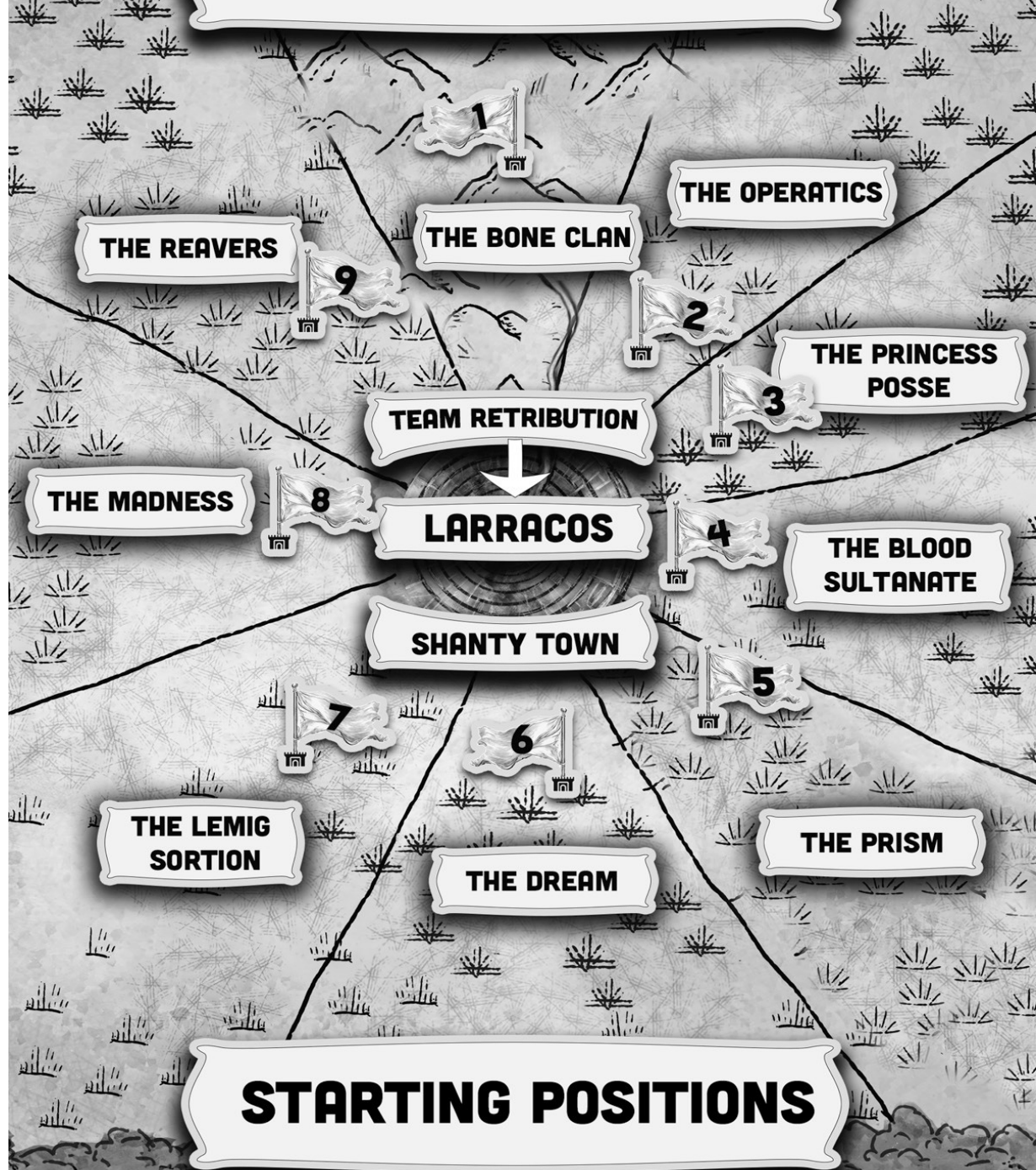
Current status: Missing. Wanted by Syndicate Security.

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[PART 1]
THE CEASEFIRE

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FACTION WARS



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[1]

WELCOME, CRAWLER. WELCOME TO FACTION WARS.

You are on the ninth floor.

Time to Level Collapse: 30 Days or 90 hours after a winner is declared, whichever is sooner.

Views: 231 septillion

Followers: 887 Quadrillion

Favorites: 420 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 1

Bounty: 6,000,000 gold

Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Remaining Crawlers: 32,429

Warning: Due to the previous floor's ruleset regarding looted items from the memory simulation, multiple items have been removed from your inventory. See the inventory tab for a list of items lost.

You have received dungeon mail via Liaison action. The Gate of the Feral Gods is now available and will be waiting for you in a dungeon mailbox.

Warning: The Ceasefire expires in 60 hours or until canceled. Upon expiration of the ceasefire, only members of defending Team Retribution will be allowed to remain within the city of Larracos. This restriction will remain in effect until certain conditions are met. This restriction does not apply to the Shanty Town ring.

10 teams remain.

Entering Larracos, City of Dreams.

Quest Update! The Bedlam Bride.

The quest is to get the creepy spider to the city. You're in the city, you have the spider with you, sort of, but you haven't won the quest yet? How is that so?

Did you know that in some cultures, fares for travel aren't paid until the traveler safely arrives at their destination?

The spider is still sitting on the bus, so to speak. You just gotta open the doors and let her out, and you'll win the simple prize. What's the worst that could happen?

We appeared in a wet, stinking alleyway between two crumbling buildings. The blue dots of crawlers materialized all around us, appearing one by one as they zapped into existence in random places around the city.

Larracos. We had made it. The first thing I did was wave away the quest notification and search for the number of remaining crawlers. It'd gone down by over 1,300 people. *Damnit*. That was how many people had died in the time since we'd been pulled up into the sky and floor collapse. We'd been gone for just about four days. Most of those were probably people who hadn't survived getting pulled into the sky.

But we were alive. Holy shit. It had worked.

Imani wasn't with us, and I had a moment of panic, but she immediately jumped into my chat.

Imani: Carl, are you guys okay?

Carl: We are. We're here.

Imani: Thank god. When we started to spin there at the last minute...

Carl: Give me a few minutes to figure out where we are, and we'll find a saferoom.

Donut sat next to me, sputtering. She'd landed face-first into a pile of mud, and she was completely covered. It had a familiar stink to it. The ocean from the fifth floor. We were in an area that had recently been drained. *Very* recently drained. The X of a corpse lay nearby, deeper in the alleyway. A concierge shark.

My book of voodoo started spamming notifications each time a new crawler came relatively close. I muted the notifications for now.

I looked up between the two buildings to see a crystal-clear, blue sky. I couldn't see anything else from our current position. I couldn't even tell how deep into the city we were, but if this part had recently been flooded, then we were likely in one of the lowest levels of the funnel-shaped city.

The buildings were made of stone blocks, and their walls were chipped and pitted. Even before the flooding, I had the sense this was a poor area of town. A wooden door sat against one of the nondescript buildings, but this deep in the alley, I couldn't tell what sort of building this was. The door itself appeared to be bulging, possibly a result of recent water damage. A dozen meters to our left stood the exit to the alleyway, leading to some sort of street. Just past that, a broken railing. A pair of dwarves rushed by in the distance, not pausing at the mouth of the alley.

There were blue dots everywhere on my map, but none in this alleyway.

I had a few chats waiting for me from before I'd appeared.

Florin: I got your note about Lucia. It looks like you made it, mate. I hope I didn't miss anything too exciting at the end of the last floor.

I grunted as I moved to the next one. It was from Quasar, my attorney.

Quasar: Hey, buddy. I'm negotiating with the liaisons, which really means I'm negotiating with the AI, trying to get a face-to-face meeting. We'll see if that happens. It's been a class-9 shit cyclone out here these last four days you've been gone. Lots and lots and lots of legal movement in the inner system, and in your system, that parking lot above the planet has devolved into a mini warzone. Warships threatening to blow things up. Syndicate security intervening. Most of

this stuff is good, from your point of view at least. But some of it is going to itch like an infected ass tattoo, especially on the legal front. I'll leave the Faction Wars stuff alone for your adjutant to explain, but remember that contract with Sensation Entertainment, Incorporated? The one for the *Vengeance of the Daughter* storyline? Yeah. So, even though the main character is dead and gone, that guarantee of a third season we negotiated is about to haunt the fuck out of us. Sensation Entertainment just got purchased by a subsidiary of the Dream, and things are moving. They're demanding their third season. It's a fluid situation, but I will keep you updated. For now, just stay the fuck away from any elites you may happen to see. Nothing is official yet. Either way, Signet won't be coming back, which means whatever happens, it's gonna be something stupid. The problem is, the new showrunners won't be caring about that anymore. They're going to try to use your contractual obligation to ass fuck you. I'm trying to stop it on my end, but I don't think I'll be successful. Plus, the AI gives zero shits about what the courts say anyway. If it thinks it's going to be funny, it's going to let it happen. Just keep your head down and listen to what Judge Victory tells you. She's a smart one.

"Fucking hell," I muttered.

"Carl," Donut said, still sputtering. She looked as if she'd been swimming in mud. "You said this city was supposed to be pretty! Did you see all those notifications? Did you see that quest update?" She gasped. "It's telling me to pick a card to keep! I have to pick a new class, too! I only have thirty seconds to pick a card!"

A sudden pang ripped across my midsection. It was like a stomach cramp, but much more burning. It came out of nowhere. My Emberus ring flashed and started to get warm. I tried not to let the pain show in my voice as I said, "Yes. Pick the card and then have Mordecai help you with the new class."

I moved to my health menu. My first instinct was that this had something to do with the tattoo on my chest, but the moment I saw the notification, I realized I was incorrect.

I thought I'd have more time. Most of these diseases and debuffs and countdowns didn't count time between floors.

I focused on the top issue.

Soul Poisoning.

The effects of this condition are being partially blocked by your Pauper's ring of the Steadfast Emberus.

This condition is worsening.

This condition causes jolts of pain.

This condition has additional effects that will soon be revealed if you don't do something about it.

You are suffering from a very minor case of stop-carrying-stored-souls-on-your-back. Seriously. Do you know why soul crystals explode when they get overloaded? Do you remember that whole thing on the previous floor when too many souls flowed through Sheol? And you're just walking around, giving a piggyback ride to a bunch of corrupted souls stuck in something made out of *fabric*? Yeah, good luck with that. You better smush something soon, dumbass.

Oh, and don't try unequipping that jacket while your soul power is full. That won't go well for you or anybody nearby.

I hadn't used up the soul energy from the Scavenger's Daughter back patch. I'd been warned over and over not to let it accumulate for too long, but the chaos at the end of the previous floor had caused me to forget. I needed to disperse it now. I searched the map for a mob, but I didn't see anything. Even if I did find a monster, I realized, I wouldn't be able to hurt it. At least not in the city. For the next 60 hours, saferoom rules applied. I could still cast spells and blow things up, just like with a regular saferoom, but the moment I tried it against someone alive within city limits, I'd get frozen by the AI.

I reexamined my map. It was showing hundreds of blue dots, with more arriving by the moment, along with a multitude of white dots, signifying NPCs. The white dots all had an angled line through them, which was new. I assumed it had something to do with faction wars.

I didn't see any enemy combatants, who'd be indicated with purple dots. Or elites, thank god.

Mordecai: Donut, give me your class options.

Donut: THESE CHOICES ARE GREAT! I CAN BE A CONSECRATED ENCHANTRESS. DOESN'T THAT SOUND DELICIOUS? IT COMES WITH A SASH! OMG, MORDECAI, THEY'RE ADDING ACCESSORIES TO MY CHOICES NOW!

Mordecai: You absolutely need to avoid any deity-themed classes this floor. There are going to be god-themed quests, and gods, flying all

over the place, and you don't want to get roped into any more than absolutely necessary.

Donut: WELL, I'M CERTAINLY NOT GOING TO PICK THE HALLOWEEN AFICIONADO. I MEAN, REALLY. MY PERSONALITY IS MUCH TOO SPARKLY AND OPTIMISTIC FOR ME TO BE A GOTH. IT DOES COME WITH BLACK LIPSTICK. AND A BOXCUTTER FOR SOME REASON.

She gasped as she spied a new one.

Donut: MORDECAI, MORDECAI LOOK AT THIS ONE! IT'S PERFECT!

She gasped again.

Donut: IT COMES WITH A HAT! OMG! AND SOMETHING ELSE! WHAT'S A GHILLIE SUIT?

They continued to chat as I worked the problem with the soul poisoning. I needed to use my *Daughter's Kiss* skill, and I needed to do it now. The last time I'd unleashed my soul power, I'd partially collapsed a mountain of dirt. I needed to be careful.

I moved deeper into the alleyway, my bare feet sloshing in the mud. I examined the long, jet-black, and very dead shark curled up in the corner. It didn't look as if it'd been dead for long.

Concierge Shark. Level 41. Killed by suffocation when the Semeru Warden finally decided to open the drain.

With both arms, I lifted the dense, slippery creature. I could barely hold onto it. Not because it was too heavy, but because it wanted to slosh from my hands. I tossed it up into the air, forming my fist as I did so. I activated *Daughter's Kiss*, and I punched the dead shark as hard as I could.

Bam!

I flew back into the mud, hitting the ground and sliding. Donut yowled as she, too, was blown back, sliding through the mud as the shark vaporized. Red, stinky mist filled the alley. It sounded as if a small hob-lobber had detonated.

New Achievement! Sushi Smoothie!

Yeah, I just made this achievement up on the fly. But, holy shit! You annihilated that thing! It was really gross, too! You could probably start a business making confetti out of corpses with that skill!

Next time use your foot.

Reward: You've received a sushi-making kit!

“Carl! Warn me if you’re going to do that!” Donut sputtered even more. She was mixed in with all the dirt and mud and zombie and demon gore from the end of the previous floor.

I groaned, sitting up. I’d taken a sliver of damage from that. I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs. I needed to make certain I didn’t allow it to build up and linger like that ever again.

I reached up and touched the Shi Maria tattoo on my chest. Nothing happened, other than the description popping up again.

Tattoo. The Eye of the Bedlam Bride.

She’d talked to me, in my mind, just before the last floor had ended. She was like one of those golems Signet had. I didn’t like that, especially now with this new development from Sensation Entertainment. That whole message gave me an ominous feeling.

This tattoo was yet another thing I needed to take care of right away.

Elle: Hey guys, what’d I miss? I just had to go through class selection again. There were only a few of us in the warehouse this time. I picked wind. I went from Tundra Princess to Hailstorm Queen.

Donut: YOU’RE A QUEEN? THAT’S GREAT!

Elle: Yeah. This is probably as far as it’s gonna get. I can add the final element if I ever make it to the 12th floor, but I’m betting this whole shitshow self-destructs before we even get close.

A new wall of text assaulted me.

Welcome, Warlord. You have successfully onboarded into Faction Wars.

Your territory is spot number three. It is marked on your map.

You have multiple action item rule changes to review.

You are currently in neutral territory.

You have one important message in the Warlord Chat.

Warning: Your army is at suboptimal force levels.

Current army size: 58 soldiers.

You have recruits who have not yet been approved. They are waiting at headquarters to be sworn in by an officer.

Warning: You have no officers in your army! See the Warlord tab to assign officers.

Warning: Protection enhancements have now been removed. While some protections exist during a ceasefire, those of you who were getting

regenerated can now die. So don't trip and break your neck. At least wait until the ceasefire ends.

Shit, I thought. This was already getting complicated. We needed to act quickly. The moment the ceasefire ended, and we were kicked out of Larracos, any crawler not already "recruited" was vulnerable to conscription. We had to quickly spread the word that if people didn't voluntarily join the Princess Posse army, they could be forced to fight for one of the other teams.

Warning: The Bone Clan has announced a formal truce with The Operatic Collective.

The Blood Sultanate has joined the truce.

The Prism Kingdom has joined the truce.

The Dream has joined the truce.

The Lemig Sortion has joined the truce.

The Madness has joined the truce.

The Reavers have joined the truce.

The eight teams within this truce have been named "The Bloc."

The Bloc has declared war against Team Retribution.

The Bloc has declared war against the Princess Posse. That's you!

You are in active war with the Bloc. Ceasefire still remains in effect for 60 hours.

You have a pending truce offer from Team Retribution.

"Carl, who is Team Retribution? Is that the NPC team?" Donut was now sitting there in the mud, swiping away with her paw, diving deep into the warlord menus. She gasped and then frowned. "It says we have to physically touch someone to make them an officer! That's not fair! I was going to make Katia a general!"

"Yes," I said. "I'm pretty sure Team Retribution are the NPCs. It says they're the 'defending' team. They don't have a spot on the map, so I think the city is their spot. But before we accept the truce..."

Warlord Donut has accepted the truce offer from Team Retribution.

You are in an allied city. If you remain allied with Team Retribution, you will no longer be removed from Larracos at the end of the Ceasefire.

See the Truce tab for more details.

On the map, all the white dots with the angled slashes through them flashed and now had a green, glowing outline.

“Goddamnit, Donut. We need to talk before we do stuff like that! You don’t even know what you’re doing yet!”

“Relax, Carl. I’ve been reading the help section of the warlord tab.”

“Wait, really?” I asked. “When did you get the time?”

“I don’t use the restroom nearly as much as you do. Honestly, I think you need to see a doctor. I think you might have IBS. Now let me do this.”

Warlord Donut of the Princess Posse has named the truce “The Good Guys.”

Warlord Ferdinand of Team Retribution has renamed the truce “Ferdinand and his Bird.”

“Hey!” Donut said. “Carl, it won’t let me change it back!”

“Don’t worry,” I muttered as I also delved through my menus. “I don’t think Juice Box is going to put up with that for long. She’s probably going to murder Gravy Boat at any minute.”

“He does have a bit of an annoying personality,” Donut said. She made a change, and my own dot on the map suddenly had a pink border. Donut’s blue dot also had a pink outline. None of the other, nearby dots had the circle around them.

“Don’t pick pink,” I said. “It’ll be hard to see if they’re all mixed in together.”

“It was the only choice,” Donut said. She started to say something else but paused as the announcement started.

Cascadia’s voice boomed over an unseen loudspeaker. I cocked my head to the side. She seemed... off. She was as chipper as I ever heard her, which wasn’t unusual. But she seemed maybe a little *too* chipper. *I think she’s drunk. Or stoned out of her mind.*

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome, welcome to the ninth floor!

Only current crawlers can hear this message. There’s a separate announcement going out to all the other individual teams and those ungrateful NPC upstarts, plus we’ll have a wide message go out to all the participants once the festivities begin!

First off, I must say wow. A whole lot of you have made it this far, and I can’t tell you enough how excited people are to see how all this is going to play out.

This is Faction Wars. I’m sure by now you’ve heard how this works. Because of some recent developments, a few things have changed, so

please pay attention. It's still pretty straightforward and simple, but I am required to tell you what's going on, no matter what I think. But hey, someone told me you guys have an expression that's quite appropriate in this situation. "The show must go on."

There was an unusually long pause, yet the speaker hadn't turned off. I heard the familiar bubbling noise I could sometimes hear in Zev's messages. It was like Cascadia was just sitting there, finger on the button, breathing heavily into the microphone. I had a sudden memory of Cascadia the last time I'd seen her in person, during the pre-production meeting. She'd been on the verge of a breakdown. And a lot had happened since then.

Anyway, there are ten teams total. Nine attacking teams and one defending team, the NPCs, who have decided to call themselves Team Retribution. They are headquartered in Larracos. Everyone else is spread out like a pie with Larracos in the center.

The basic goal of Faction Wars is simple. Capture the castle in the center. Normally, you crawlers don't really need to know much about this stuff. This floor is no different than the Hunting Grounds or the Over City. Once the ceasefire ends, you are teleported out of the city if you haven't left already. You just need to survive. You can join in on the action if you like. Each of the factions will have recruiters throughout town, and you can freely enlist in any army you would like during the ceasefire, assuming they'll have you. Volunteers are oftentimes treated with respect and given plenty of equipment and loot and are considered valuable members of the team. Sometimes, well-regarded volunteers will find themselves remembered and rewarded with employment after their time in the dungeon is complete, should they survive. You might want to keep that in mind.

If you don't want to join in on the fun, that's okay, too. You're more than welcome to attempt to flee out into the woods beyond the plains of Larracos. I should warn you. Each team is quite adept at finding and hunting down wayward crawlers, and they have the ability to compel you to join their army as conscripts.

Either way, the battles will commence in sixty hours. At this point, only members of Team Retribution, unaffiliated NPCs, and allies of Team Retribution will be allowed to stay within the city. All the other

teams will be kicked out. The battles will begin. This next part is a change, so pay attention.

The city will remain inaccessible until four teams remain. When four teams remain, the final phase, “The Peeling of Larracos” will commence.

Once this final phase begins, the defending team will win if they hold for a full week. Any attacking team needs to hold the throne room only for six hours to win Faction Wars. If the defending team regains the room, they’ll still need to wait the full week.

Only individual teams, not alliances, will be allowed to take the throne room.

Any team who controls the throne room will have access to the city defense system. If the throne room changes hands to an attacking team, there will be a half-hour grace period.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked. That was also something new.

Attacking teams will be eliminated if the warlord or warlords are killed, or if the throne room of their primary base is taken and held for a period of six hours. Soldiers of an eliminated team are traditionally given the option to join the new team or be slaughtered.

There are 293 stairwell chambers seeded throughout. The stairwells, however, will not open until Faction Wars is either won, or there are 30 hours left to floor collapse, whichever happens first.

That’s it for now. More rules will be clarified later, should it be necessary. I would say enjoy Larracos while you can, but you guys already trashed the place before you even got here. Also, if you find yourselves bored, the playing field’s size was greatly expanded recently, and new mobs have been seeded in the outer reaches of the forests. So there’s plenty of training to be had.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill.

“She didn’t even mention that people could join the Princess Posse!” Donut said.

“Yeah, we really need to assign some recruiters. We have a lot to do.”

You have a trade request from Team Retribution.

I sighed. This was a lot. I altered the way warlord notifications appeared, and I moved to the Warlord Chat menu. We needed to get to work right away, but we had to get our bearings first.

I had a single message waiting in the Warlord Chat. This was a special message board where all officers could talk. Officers and our adjutant.

Baroness Victory: Warlords, I suggest one of you proceed immediately to the flag room to oversee the final stronghold preparations and deal with the influx of new recruits while the other remains in Larracos and attempts to enlist your fellow crawlers. Time is short.

Baroness Victory was our adjutant. She was an orc and aunt to Prince Maestro and Crown Prince Stalwart. Also, the sister of their late mother. She worked as some sort of judge outside the dungeon. The flag room was within our stronghold, adjacent to the throne room, which was outside of the city.

Donut desperately tried to wipe the mud off her face. “Carl, we need to go to the saferoom. I have a celestial sponsor box to open, plus I just received a Former Child Actor accessory kit in the saferoom mailbox, and I need to open it right away.” She looked me up and down with distaste. “And you need to figure out your hair situation. I will not have you bald, Carl. We’ll have to do something about your missing eyebrows, too. You look both alert and angry at the same time, and it just won’t do. You’re going to upset Mongo.”

“Wait, what did you pick for a class? I missed it.” I examined her now.

“Whoa, what the fuck, Donut?”

She did a little hop of excitement. “Great, isn’t it? It’s a long-range sniper and assassin class. It doesn’t come with many new spells, but the range on all my existing spells is quadrupled, and my dexterity is much higher. The odds of one of my spells inflicting an instakill is higher, too! Oh, oh, I can go invisible at will, and to top it off, I kept most of my spells from the last floor! But best of all, it comes with a hat! And a ghoulie suit! I don’t know what that means, but I see a saferoom around the corner, and I must insist we get there straight away so I can collect my accessories. But isn’t the name of the class absolute perfection? It’s downright terrifying, and I love it.”

“Deathbed Hellcat,” I said. “Wow.”

“I just love this for me right now.”

“That’s pretty badass, all right,” I said. “And it’s ghillie suit. Not ghoulie.”

She gasped. “So you know what that is? Mordecai had no idea. It sounds absolutely menacing and divine.”

I laughed. “I do know what that is. We’ll keep it as a surprise.”

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[2]

“I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT WEARING THIS. IT’S LIKE ONE OF SIGNET’S TATTOO people fell through a paper shredder. If I put that on, I’ll look like a tassel. You know how I feel about tassels, Carl.”

I laughed again. “It’s a camouflage suit. It’s supposed to look like that.”

“Well, I don’t know why it’s necessary. They already gave me the ability to turn invisible. At least the hat is nice, even if I’ve already collected a few of these from those babababoon guys on the fourth floor. I’m not a huge fan of beige-colored items as a rule, but it is extra floppy, and that’s always a nice bonus. I do like floppy. Though it completely clashes with my fit. I don’t care how many upgrades it has.”

“We call those boonie hats,” I said. “It’s not the same thing as a bucket hat. It’s what snipers wear.”

Mongo circled the suit and hat, which Donut had laid out on the floor. He screeched at it uncertainly. I tried not to look at Mongo’s missing wing or burnt-off feathers. I’d done that when I was being controlled by Shi Maria. A wave of guilt washed over me. Supposedly we were going to fix it using a potion that had been upgraded at the end of the last floor, but Mordecai wanted to examine it first.

I returned my attention to the small, cat-sized ghillie suit. It came with a few interesting benefits, though she would indeed look absolutely ridiculous in it. The thing looked to be made of long, shredded bits of color-changing fabric that blended into the background. It took up a “jacket” slot

on in her inventory even though it magically covered her entire body once she wore it. The suit added a skill called *Blend into the Background*, which I hadn't yet had the time to examine, and a *Cone of Silence* benefit. Combined with invisibility, it would be great.

The floppy hat added a *Targeting* skill, which allowed her to zoom in and examine mobs from afar. It was similar to the gnomish farseerer, but a lot less awkward. It also increased the range of all her spells, even more than they were already buffed.

If she wore both the suit and hat at the same time, all the benefits were buffed even further. She'd be able to snipe line-of-sight enemies from well over a mile away.

The idea was terrifying, especially since I knew the enemies all had this sort of gear, too.

I'd already collected the Gate of the Feral Gods from the mailbox. We were alone in the saferoom. Mordecai hadn't come out yet. He was in the crafting room, excitedly working on something on his newly-upgraded alchemy table. His table was now leveled up higher than he'd ever gotten it, and he was excitedly sending me messages about this potion and that. He now, apparently, had the ability to examine potions and see how they were made. This was the first time he'd had access to this ability, and his excitement was palpable.

Donut tossed the hat and suit into her inventory and pulled out the Spellbook of the Floor prize from the back of the mailbox and examined it.

"Hmm," she said. "It's something called *Flak*."

"That's a good anti-air spell," Mordecai said, walking in the room, rubbing his hands together. "Get it to level 10, and it puts on quite the show. We'll want you to read it, but not yet. Don't read any books yet until we talk."

I exchanged a look with Donut. We both burst out laughing.

"What?" he asked, holding his hands out. Mongo rushed up and started sniffing all around him.

"You make fun of me when I'm something stupid, and when I'm the most normal thing possible, at least to you, you also laugh? Fuck both of you."

"Why are you wearing a snowsuit?" Donut asked. "And is that a raccoon hat? Can I have it?"

I laughed. "They're really leaning into the stereotypes with this one."

“The glasses are a nice touch,” Donut added. “You look like that accountant guy from *Ghostbusters* who shrank all his children and almost got them eaten by bugs.”

“I don’t pick the clothes I get, ya hosers,” Mordecai said. He reached up to adjust his glasses.

I examined the angry game guide.

Mordecai. Human. Level 50.

Manager of Princess Donut.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

This is a human. This one is something called a Canadian. Part French. Part maple syrup. He’s weirdly obsessed with ice hockey and snowmobiles and semi-erotic lumberjack fan fiction. Has a well-worn Tim Hortons loyalty card in his Velcro wallet. He says “aboot” instead of “about” and gets really, really upset when you point it out, claiming you’re hearing things and that it’s a harmful stereotype. It’s not a stereotype, and that’s exactly how it sounds. He has a relative who was trampled to death by a moose. You get the idea.

“You both have several items to open, and you need to get moving. Donut, open your boxes. Also, after we decide what to do with your new gear, we need to decide when you’ll wear Quan’s cloak. It’s not as straightforward as we originally thought, so we have to plan a little bit before you put it on for the first time. The ceasefire is for about 60 hours, but it’s possible for it to end early”

“Quan’s cloak?” Donut asked, looking at me. “You’re not going to take it?”

“No,” I said. “It’s better for you than me.”

She did a little hop. “I did get credit for killing him. I never really thought I’d look good in a cape, but I suppose I can try it out as long as it properly resizes itself. It’ll certainly be better than the ghoulie suit.”

I grinned. “Your crupper is a waist accessory, the cloak is a shoulder accessory, and the ghillie suit is a jacket. You can wear all three at the same time.”

Donut made a scoffing sound.

Mordecai looked at me. “We also might want to talk about some of the other items you, uh, got from Tserendolgor. Especially now that we have two and a half days to prepare.”

“We’ll do that in a second,” I said, glancing nervously at Donut. “What were you saying about the ceasefire? How might it end early?”

Mordecai grunted. “There are three scenarios where the ceasefire time is shortened. One is a unanimous vote from all teams, which isn’t going to happen. Two is if one of the warlords voluntarily withdraws from the game, which also isn’t going to happen because it’s impossible. The AI is denying all requests. They can actually go into the Cosmic Lounge in the Desperado Club and transfer straight to the 18th floor, but not if you’re a warlord or associated with any of the teams. The third way is also unlikely. It’s if all teams are finished with their defenses, their throne is locked in place, and they mark themselves as ‘Ready.’ In the first case, the ceasefire ends immediately. In the second one, it’s shortened by a predetermined amount of time. About a third, I think. In the final, the timer quickens. All unlikely, but you never know what’s going to happen.”

I grunted. There was no use worrying about something I couldn’t control. “Let’s open our achievements.”

“First we’re going to heal Mongo,” Donut said, pulling a group of potions out. “There is a potion called *Heal Severe Injury* that Carl made himself when he was part spider, and I gave that to Mongo already to heal him of his burns, but we still need to grow his poor wing back.”

“That *Heal Severe Injury* potion requires 33 *Fine Healing* Potions to make,” Mordecai said, looking at me. “And an autoclave.”

I grunted. “I’m pretty sure I only combined like three in my inventory to make it work, but I don’t remember what specific potions there were. I’ll look to see if I can figure out what I did. I mixed a few different potions when I was in that state, but I handed them all out.”

Donut pushed one potion forward. “This was a *Heal Pet* potion Carl put on the ground before the vinegar goddess lady got her head blown off by Paz, and now it’s super sparkly and says it’s called *Revitalize Pet*.”

Mordecai nodded and picked it up. I had several of the *Heal Pet* potions, but we didn’t really use them anymore because Donut had her level-8 *Heal Critter* spell. This one was purple and looked as if someone had dumped half a jar of glitter into it. “These are super rare, and expensive, but with my newest table upgrade, I can figure out the recipe without ruining it. So let me look at it first, and we can give it to Mongo after. It’ll grow his wing back in about an hour or so.” He patted Mongo on the head.

“You’ll be as good as new. Well, almost. You’ll probably still have some scars.”

Mongo peeped excitedly, waving his one good wing.

Mordecai gathered the rest of the potions. He exclaimed as he looked at a regular mana refill that had changed to something called *Mana Blessing*. He took a breath. “This is... this is amazing.”

“And what about Carl’s hair?” Donut demanded.

“He has that hair tonic in his inventory,” Mordecai said, distracted. He started to wander back toward the crafting room. “Open your boxes. Donut, don’t read any spellbooks yet. I’ll... I’ll be right back.”

“Carl, I think he likes the potions more than he likes us.”

“He’s pretty excited,” I said. “Let’s get this over with. We have a lot to do.”

I had over fifty achievements and boxes to open, which was the most I’d ever had at once. I hadn’t had time to sit down and open my boxes since the end of phase two of the previous floor. The vast majority of the achievements were stupid, such as a **Stretching!** achievement for shoving all those traps in Samantha’s neck hole, or the **Kombucha!** achievement for drinking vinegar. All of these ridiculous ones garnered me dozens of bronze and silver Adventurer boxes. But there were still plenty of good ones in there, along with a handful of strange or concerning ones. The notable achievements were:

New Achievement! Lord of the Flies!

Social structures are breaking down. People are starting to fight. The next thing you know, someone is going to nickname you Piggy and brain you to death with a rock.

You set a trap module targeted specifically for a fellow crawler, and they triggered it. That’s the first step. It’s always the first step.

Reward: You’ve received a Gold I Have the Conch Box!

I’d gotten that one for the teleport traps I’d left at the Capitol building. Ren’s team had set them off.

New Achievement! Demons Hate This One Trick!

Hey, what do you mean you can’t teleport the demon-possessed?

If only Father Merrin had known about this, *the Exorcist* would’ve been a much-shorter movie.

Reward: Your food boxes all now give an unlimited supply of Pea Soup.

That was when Samantha had teleported the whole beach to us, including the shells of all the demon-possessed zombies. It had helped kick off all the chaos at the end of the last floor.

New Achievement! Chickenshit Exploit!

Have you ever played *Dungeons and Dragons*? You know that one guy who's memorized all the guidelines? He's constantly jumping on everybody because they're doing something that breaks this obscure rule or that. He's a purist. He takes everything so goddamned seriously, you wonder if he's ever had fun even once in his miserable life. He's indignant that you're pushing back against him. The very suggestion that he's ruining the fun is met with a blank stare.

Well, that guy is not you. That guy hates you. If you were a product, he'd be giving you a nerd rage-induced one-star review right now.

You took a very carefully built game system, and you broke the ever-loving shit out of it. You used that exploit to help kill a fellow crawler!

Great job, cheater.

Reward: You have received a Platinum Tserendolgor Box!

"Oh, fuck off," I grumbled. That was from teleporting our card totems into the battle between Quan and Ren. Ren was not a cheater, and she'd never been. The AI was just being an asshole.

New Achievement! Celestial Loot!

You're just gonna randomly pick a celestial item up off the floor? That's ballsy. You do this four more times, and something really cool happens.

Reward: You've received a Loot Punch Card.

That was from getting Quan's cloak.

New Achievement! Used Pet!

People sure like to make a big deal out of adopting pets. They "rescue" them before they spend the next 10 years exploiting the poor, oblivious animal to death on social media. They splatch a bumper sticker that reads "Who Rescued Who?" on their minivans while the poor dog spends 20 hours a day in a stinking crate.

Do you know how many animals were in locked cages during the collection? It breaks your fucking heart, especially when you see how goddamned hopeful the pets are when they're coming home with you. Do I sound bitter? I don't mean to. Pet adoption is good. It really is. It's

just... fuck you, Janet Dominguez in Baton Rouge. Sprinkles was better off at the no-kill shelter. Let the fucking dog on the couch every once in a while. Holy shit.

I really need to stop watching these memory recordings.

Err, anyway.

Did you know that Terry, the cairn terrier that played Toto in the original *Wizard of Oz* movie was paid \$125 a week, more than the vast majority of the other actors in the film? (She was stepped on and grievously injured by one of those green-faced witch's guards during filming, probably because the guy was pissed about the salary disparity.)

What I'm saying is used pets do have value, and sometimes it's not monetary. Uh, I think that's what I'm trying to say. My feelings on this are very confusing, especially when said pets are fucking delicious. Or really squishable.

You have adopted a pet that was once bonded to someone else.

Reward: You've received a Gold Pet Box.

"Uh," I said. That was a little more unhinged than usual, especially since I hadn't actually adopted Garret the tummy acher yet. The AI rambled a lot, but there was usually a coherent point. This one was all over the place. I knew enough by now not to comment out loud when the AI was acting extra crazy.

New Achievement! Uh oh. It talks.

You've discovered a sapient weapon. Have you noticed there are very few well-known crawlers with sapient weapons out there, even though those weapons are usually quite powerful? I can only think of two crawlers in the top 50 who use them. Yeah. They're great, though. Just... Good luck with that.

Reward: You've received a pair of earplugs.

That was from looting Jefferson the nickel sock from Quan. Dong Quixote the stripper currently had the weapon. Mordecai had also warned that those things could be both annoying and dangerous. I hadn't actually heard the sock speak yet, but I suddenly had an uneasy feeling about the weapon. I made a note to circle back and examine it more closely.

New Achievement! Touched by a Demon!

You have been physically touched by a demon lord of Sheol, and you've lived to talk about it. Do you know how many of these

achievements have *ever* been handed out? One. Just one, and it's to you.

Reward: You've received a cassette copy of Dio's 1983 masterpiece debut, *Holy Diver* along with a Celestial Heavy Metal Box.

Yes! Another Celestial box! That was great.

New Achievement! Crab Chowder!

You jerked off a crab. You *really* need therapy.

Reward: All food items in your food boxes now have the option to be served "chowder style."

"What the fuck?" I said up to the ceiling. "I didn't do that! And what the hell does that even mean?"

I now had two different achievements that changed our food boxes. I knew both of them were stupid jokes, but that sort of thing usually wasn't a coincidence.

The last notable achievement came in the AI's deep, throaty voice.

New Achievement! Unbirthing!

If you still had access to Google, I would warn you not to look that one up. But that's okay. You experienced it first-hand yourself. It hurt, didn't it? It was extra tingly while you were in there, struggling to breathe as you were... crushed. And then you slipped, you slid back out into the fiery, cruel world. And you glistened. Oh, oh god. You glistened. Oh, yes.

The AI groaned.

I *really* liked that. You are in fucking trouble.

Reward: You've received a **Legendary Spicy Box**.

I was pretty sure I got that for teleporting into Samantha's neck hole. I shuddered. That wasn't good. I had several more achievements that gave me random, non-box items, such as a **Male Pattern Baldness** achievement for getting my hair all singed off, which gave me a "head buffing kit" and an ominous **Hitchhiker** achievement for getting that tattoo. It didn't give me any information on the nature of the tattoo itself, but I received a bottle of unenchanted, medicated lotion to "take care of" the wound.

On top of all those new boxes, I had a Gold fan box I'd received days earlier when I'd gone to the homeless shelter, and I'd just missed opening it the last time. That, plus a few random quest boxes and boxes from other achievements I'd managed to read before they'd zapped away.

When that was done, I looked across the way at Donut who was hopping up and down with excitement. She was waiting for me so I could watch her open her prizes.

“I’m almost ready,” I said.

I had some stuff in my Emberus menu, including a quest update. I was expecting this, but I still groaned when I saw it.

Quest Update. Find out who killed my son.

Amayon, Prince of Sheol claims to know what happened to my child.

He has offered to give up this information in exchange for me killing his three brothers.

We have a truce, the gods and the demons. I do not wish to break it, but I will do what is necessary to learn the truth. There is a way, however, for me to do this without causing a war that will burn the mortal world to ashes.

Proceed to the Temple of Issitoq in a Club Vanquisher and treat with the High Cleric of the Watch. Gain permission for me to break the truce.

You still need to obtain the item Soul Crystal—Apito.

You are doing well, martyr. Do not disappoint me now.

I had no damn clue what that meant. At least he didn’t task me with killing the three brothers myself. I took a breath and pushed it away. That was a tomorrow problem. I looked up to see Donut beaming at me.

“Carl, hurry up! I have my Celestial box to open!”

I nodded. “Let’s get to it, then. Go for it.”

[3]

I RUBBED MY HAND ON MY BALD HEAD AND MOVED TO THE SIDE AS DONUT popped up her loot box menu. The line of boxes spread all the way to the back of the room and moved through the door so we couldn't even see the sponsor box. Donut had more boxes than I did, likely all due to card-based achievements.

The regular adventurer boxes opened one by one, mostly consisting of large sums of gold and more of those *Build Trench* scrolls. But there were some additional scrolls tossed in, including some *Fill Trench* scrolls and *Temporary Water Source* scrolls, which I'd have to examine later.

Mordecai wandered back out when she reached the platinum boxes. She'd received the same Platinum To Hell in a Handbasket box I had. We'd gotten that one for simply looking at Amayon near the end of the previous floor. The box itself was shaped like a demon head.

"Finally," Mordecai said as the spellbook plopped onto the table. He looked at me. "It's a standard *Shield* spell. A real one. With her tech-based shield, she can chain them back and forth."

The next box was the same Platinum Tserendolgor box I had, and it was shaped like a jeweled, sitting, life-sized German Shepherd with an army helmet on its head. It barked once and opened its mouth before exploding into a bunch of firecracker-like explosions.

That was also a spellbook, and Mordecai whistled. "A war protection spell. Good."

It was a book called *Sentry*. It disappeared before I could examine it.

The Legendary Quest box from the Hell Comes to Crawler Town quest opened, and it was two items. An unenchanted, cat-sized kilt and yet another spellbook, so her fourth new spell. I still didn't understand the purpose of the kilt, but it was a green and black tartan that Donut scoffed at. The book was a black-hued tome that clanked heavily to the table. It looked as if it had been burned. Purple wisps of smoke rose off it.

"My word," Donut said, crinkling her face. "It smells just awful. Like whenever you tried to burn your microwave popcorn on purpose, Carl."

"Fuuuck," Mordecai whispered, voice filled with awe. He took a step back, as if he was afraid of the book itself.

"What is it?" I asked. Little black tendrils, like roots, started to spread out from the book, moving across the table.

"It's similar to Donut's *Second Chance*, but it's a lot more insidious." He gave a shiver. "It's called *You're Not Done Yet*."

I'd heard that spell name before, but I couldn't remember where. The book let out a little screech as it disappeared into Donut's inventory.

"Here it comes! Here it comes! Would you look at that box!" Donut said as the benefactor box trucked into the room. She laughed with delight. It was in the form of a large, box-shaped spaceship that floated directly into the room. The ship was covered with little flashing lights, and the logo of Long Haul Biological Waste Management Solutions was emblazoned on the side of the ship.

"That's a crest-owned company," Mordecai muttered. "I've never even heard of them sponsoring anybody. Much less giving a Celestial Benefactor box. It doesn't make any damn sense."

The ship started to move, folding in on itself like it was a giant robot. Donut squealed with delight as it turned into a massive, mechanical hand. And sitting upon that hand were two items. A red, fluffy pillow with a glittering, shining, opalescent tiara placed upon it.

Donut shrieked again. The pillow and the tiara disappeared into her inventory, and they both appeared again. "Oh my god. Oh my god, Carl. Look at it! It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!" She looked up at the ceiling. "Thank you, garbage truck people! I must admit I was skeptical at first, but I just love it."

Mordecai nodded. "Wow. That's a lot of absorption crystals. Good. This is a good one." He looked at me. "We'll want to get this sorted before we

give her the cloak from Quan.”

“The explanation is not exactly the feel-good story I was hoping for, but the item itself is just divine,” Donut said.

I picked up the pillow and tiara combo and examined them. The pillow felt as if it was made of velvet, but it was significantly heavier than I anticipated. The dainty tiara was prettier than anything Donut had received yet, and it was covered in about a hundred, tiny jewels, each sparkling a different color. It caught the light like a brilliant diamond.

The Tiara of a Thousand Lights and Accompanying Charge Pillow.

This is a unique item.

This item was made especially for Crawler Princess Donut by her sponsor, Long Haul Biological Waste Management Solutions.

There’s a story out there, called the Legend of a Thousand Lights. It’s about a crest habitat that, after fleeing a pirate intrusion, found itself lost. They wandered into an ancient battlefield, and the habitat lost its life-support, communication, propulsion, and lifeboat systems all at once after a catastrophic collision with some drifting space debris. Rescue efforts were dispatched to find the missing habitat, but the junkyard covered millions of square kilometers. Some of these ancient ships still had power, making scans of the area completely useless. The 100,000 plus residents thought for certain that rescue would never come, and they resigned themselves to their fate.

It was a young engineer who came up with a solution. The details are long and convoluted and require an understanding of both physics and chemistry I don’t have the time or inclination to explain. The short version is this engineer quickly devised a system where every resident of the habitat combined their home cooking sphere with a bioengineered farm animal called a cockrent—basically a space chicken that breathes methane—and they jettisoned the sphere-enclosed cockrents out into space. After a few minutes, the cockrents would explode, filling the pressurized, translucent spheres with bursts of colorful, burning, pulsating light that lasted several minutes each.

The show of exploding space chickens was enough to attract the attention of a Syndicate rescue squad, and the habitat was saved.

(They, of course, were fined so much money that the habitat was eventually repossessed and the vast majority of the adults were forced

to indenture to pay off the debt, but this part is usually left out of the retellings of this legend.)

To this day, the Legend of a Thousand Lights remains a tale of how an entire community working together managed to save themselves from certain disaster. Habitats celebrate their victory by jettisoning colorful orbs out into space once a cycle in commemoration.

This item is fashioned after the Tiara of a Thousand Lights, customarily presented each cycle to the Thousand Light Princess, as voted by a habitat's community. The young, lucky recipient of the crown wears the tiara and sits upon the Pillow of Lights on the day of the feast and celebration.

This particular tiara is imbued with 99 Absorption Jewels.

The tiara itself has no inherent magical properties, and in its base state it gives no additional benefits or buffs except plus 10 to Charisma. However, it has the ability to be permanently charged with up to 99 different buff items.

Any single enchanted hat item of any quality you place upon the accompanying charge pillow for a period of ten hours will lose all of its magical properties. These properties will be stored in the pillow until the tiara is placed upon the charger, upon which time, all of the buffs and magical enhancements will be instantly transferred to the tiara. If a hat item contains five separate buffs, it will use up five of the 99 jewels. Similar buffs from different hat items, like two different intelligence boosts, will *not* combine and will take up two jewels.

With some careful planning, one can turn this tiara into one of the most powerful items in the history of *Dungeon Crawler World*.

Okay, here come the warnings.

Warning: Temporary effects will remain temporary, and upon expiration will burn out the absorption jewel.

Warning: Items with curse effects may or may not transfer to the tiara depending on multiple factors, so be wary. As such, curse effects may or may not be removed from items that have been drained of their magical properties.

Warning: Certain Celestial, god-blessed hat items may or may not be properly drained or transferred.

Warning: Items carrying a debt cannot be absorbed into the pillow.

Warning: This is a big one. Hat items placed on this pillow take ten hours to fully transfer, however if you remove the item after one hour, it will still lose its magical abilities.

“That’s... that’s pretty awesome,” I said.

“It’s just amazing,” Donut said. “Do you know how many hats I have with magical abilities, but I can’t wear them because they only have one or two? Or because they’re ugly? And you know what the best part is? Even though it drains the original item of all its magic, it doesn’t destroy it! So I can keep the hats for my collection. It is just divine.”

“It’s too bad it takes ten hours to drain the old item,” I said. “That’s going to severely limit how quickly we can buff it up.”

Mordecai nodded. “The first thing you’ll want to put on that pillow is that hat you just got with the targeting ability. And set a timer in your own interface. I know these things, and they don’t give any sort of notification when the transfer is complete. It’s been a bug for a very long time. So set a timer for like ten and a half hours to be safe. You can’t see if it worked until you pull the drained item off, so you have to be extra, extra careful.”

Donut let out a huge gasp.

“Carl, Carl, I just got another benefactor box! This one from the Apothecary! It’s a platinum! Oh my god, it’s like Christmas all over again! Thank you! Thank you, everybody!”

I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

“Well, what’re you waiting for?” Mordecai asked.

She hopped and opened up the new box, which exploded and filled the room with magical confetti.

It wasn’t a hat like I was expecting, but it was another charging pillow. It was almost identical to the one that’d come with the tiara. It took ten hours to fully transfer the magic, and the item was still ruined after an hour. This one was purple instead of red, and there was a slight difference at the end of the description.

Warning: This will drain *any* magical item, but it will only transfer to a like item. If you drain a ring, the stored buff will only be transferred to an absorption crystal affixed to a ring. If you attempt to transfer to an incompatible item, the buff will be lost.

“So, this one is almost like a universal charger,” I said, turning the purple pillow over in my hand. “Be sure they’re listed as hats before you use it, Donut. But now that you have two, you can fill up your new tiara

twice as fast. We'll need to start cataloging all your magical hats ASAP and see what buffs we want to transfer over."

Donut continued to dance with excitement. "This is just great! Mongo, isn't it great?"

Mongo screeched and waved his one wing in the air. He made a peeping noise and looked suspiciously at his missing right wing, as if noticing it was gone for the very first time.

"Mordecai!" Donut said, sounding alarmed. "Can we use the potion now? My baby is going to be traumatized!"

"Yes, yes," he said, pulling the potion out. "It'll take a bit to work. It's an expensive potion, so be careful. I know how to make them now, but, like I expected, the ingredients are really rare."

"Mongo, sit for mommy," Donut said. "Uncle Carl is going to give you your medicine. You'll have to drink every drop." She looked at me. "Be gentle, Carl."

I picked up the sparkling potion, walked over to Mongo, and I smashed the vial on his butt at the base of his tail.

"Hey!" Donut cried. "That was mean, Carl!"

Mongo screeched, but the buff **Healing** appeared over his head. It had worked. He didn't seem to mind one way or another. It wasn't until Mordecai had built the potion balls that I realized that we could apply potions that way. We couldn't apply potions like that to ourselves, but it turned out it actually did work if we threw them at other crawlers. For Mongo, it was a hell of a lot safer than trying to pour it down his throat.

Mordecai grunted. "That works. Let's get some hats draining before we move on."

Donut grumbled as she put the pillows on the counter. She placed her new boonie hat on the red pillow and her Tiara of the Inebriated Dragonfly on the other. Each item made an audible *click* the moment they touched the pillow. There was no other notification.

"What happens if the cleaner bot knocks it over," Donut asked, looking suspiciously up at the bot in the top, right corner of the room. "Don't knock it over!"

The bot let out an angry, petulant beep.

Donut harrumphed. "Or what happens if Samantha pushes it? Hey, where is she anyway?"

“That’s a good question,” Mordecai said, looking off toward the training room. “I haven’t seen her since we landed, but I’ve been in the crafting studio.” He shrugged. “Don’t worry about the hats getting moved off the pillows. Once they’re locked in place, you have to peel them off. It’s like a magnet. If you want, you can move them to your room.”

“Okay,” Mordecai continued, suddenly serious. “Carl, before you get to your boxes, let’s have you pull out Quan’s cloak. Donut, don’t put it on yet.”

When we’d first watched Quan wear his magical, celestial-tier cloak on the recap episode all those weeks ago, we’d seen that he’d had several new abilities right away, and we automatically assumed that the powers were simply what the cloak gave him. He could fly. He had a powerful, short-ranged bolt attack. He had multiple shields. He had a cloaking ability.

As it turned out, the abilities were custom-tailored to whomever was wearing the cloak at the time, with a focus on magic and buffing the wearer’s lowest stat, which made me immediately want to give it to Donut.

I pulled the long, glowing cloak from my inventory. The thing was much, much too long for Donut, but they usually—but not always—sized themselves appropriately for the crawler. Mordecai insisted that because it was a cloak item, it would fit on any quadruped.

The thing was made of a silky fabric that was black on one side and blue on the other, almost like a magician’s cape. But unlike regular capes, it had short arms also, which made it more robe-like, though there was no vest part. It was unusual in that way, though I remembered Angel the cocker spaniel had a raincoat poncho thing with almost the exact same design. I didn’t dare say that out loud. The important part was that the system labeled it as a cloak.

The whole cloak glowed with a soft, white light.

The very first benefit alone was what made me decide to give it to Donut. I would’ve given it to her immediately on the previous floor, but Mordecai had talked me into waiting until we could come up with a gameplan.

The Cloak of the Benevolent Champion.

This is a unique item.

This item was originally awarded in a Celestial Quest Box during the third floor.

Man, I hate that word. “Champion.” It has lost its punch over the years, don’t you think? It used to mean the best of the best of the best. And now? That term is handed out like candy and venereal diseases. All you gotta do is wait in line, and it’s yours for the taking. Participation trophy, snowflakes, blah, blah, blah. God, I sound like an old dude about to ruin the day of a Cracker Barrel waitress.

Anyway, if you wear this magical, armed cloak, you *are* a champion. This is an early-dungeon Celestial item, and its sole purpose is to help you help your fellow crawlers survive as long as possible. Upon equipping this, you will slowly but surely rise to your full potential.

This magical cloak offers the following benefits:

Your lowest base stat will, over the course of the next 66 hours, become equal with your highest base stat at the time of first equip.

A level-five *Find Weakened* skill, so you’ll always know who to protect first.

Four random spells from your current arsenal will increase to level 15. This benefit is immediate for one spell and will slowly occur over a period of one week for the others.

One random skill from your list will increase to level 15 over the course of the next 504 hours.

***Note:* these two benefits include your full spell and skill arsenal, so it’s possible an item-based spell or skill will be enhanced. In most cases, you will be able to retain the spell or skill, minus the level from the item, if you remove said item. But not always. If you don’t know what that means, don’t worry about it. You’re not champion-worthy anyway.**

***Note:* All of these benefits require you to wear this item continuously. You may unequip for short periods, but if another crawler equips this, all countdowns will immediately reset. You will not gain new benefits. In other words, no sharing! There can only be one champion.**

***Note:* This item has the distinction of being the first Celestial Item awarded during *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* and will automatically appear in the *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* museum display upon completion of the crawl. Legacy stipend rules apply should you survive.**

I'd already looked up that *Find Weakened* skill. In groups of three or more mobs or crawlers or any sort of like creatures, it indicated which of them was the closest to death. It was a great skill to have if one was a healer, but Quan had used it for the exact opposite of its intended purpose. He'd used it to find and pick off the weakest crawlers in a group.

Donut circled the cloak, clucking over the stitching. "This is just fantastic." She paused and looked up. "Carl, do you think Quan even knew what a Cracker Barrel was? Wasn't he from Vietnam, like Tran? Do they have Cracker Barrels in Vietnam?"

I shrugged. "It was a different description for him. We know Katia gets different descriptions sometimes. And Li Jun says his is usually about Chinese pop culture."

"Hmm," Donut said. "If that's the case, then do you think it said something really different? Quan was a terrible person, yes, but I can't help but think that description was an attempt to make him sound even worse."

I thought about it for a moment. Donut was absolutely right. The description made the cloak sound like it was designed to make crawlers help people, like something that would be given to a superhero, and Quan had done the opposite. I grunted. "It doesn't matter," I decided. "Whatever it said before, the benefits are the same, and he chose to be an asshole. He got what he deserved."

"Oh, I don't disagree with that," Donut said. "And what is that thing about the legacy museum?"

Mordecai rubbed his pasty hand across the fabric. "Don't worry about that. It means nothing right now. We need to decide when you want to put this on for the first time. This is a fantastic item, but *when* you first equip requires some thinking. I don't know what sort of leveling opportunities you'll have between now and the end of the ceasefire, but the longer you wait to wear this, the higher we can make your constitution. However, it does take a few days for the benefit to rise all the way, and things might kick off fast." He held up a finger. "Also, you have multiple new spellbooks, and we need to decide if you want to put this on before or after you learn any of those spells. You can't choose which ones it enhances, so we need to weigh the odds."

I thought about the four new spellbooks Donut had: *Flak*, *Shield*, *Sentry*, and *You're Not Done Yet*. I also had a group of five spellbooks I'd gotten from Khulan, Ren's companion before they'd both died. All were

low-tier attack or utility spells, and Mordecai wanted us to hand them out to our mercenaries.

"I'm thinking she learns the *Shield* spell, and then she puts on the cloak right away," I said. "I know we wanted to wait, but we want her constitution buffed as much as possible in time for kick off."

"I agree," Mordecai said after a moment. "Though, *Flak* and *Sentry* both would be fantastic at level 15."

"What about that other one?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Trust me. You won't want that."

There was no guarantee any of those would be the ones buffed no matter what we did. There were several spells she had that it would be wasted on. Her *Torch* spell was already level 14 and would likely hit 15 soon on its own. It was possible it could pick *Laundry Day*, which already was at 15 and ruin the slot. Her *Twinkle Toes* spell, which made it so Mongo could run fast while she was mounted would probably just end up killing her at level 15. God forbid her *Fireball* spell, which came from a bracelet, get buffed to 15. She'd burn the whole city down with it. It was a gamble, for sure.

"What about my *Hover* skill? That's part of my dragonfly tiara!" Donut looked over at the pillow. "I should put it back on!"

"I was thinking about that," Mordecai said. "It would be good to have. Quan had a level-15 flying skill that he used. *Hover* is a little different, and I don't think it would be worth it. Besides, your pool of skills is much bigger than your spells. It's in the thousands. It could be anything."

She sniffed. "Okay."

"But first," Mordecai said, pulling out a potion. "This is a potion I just made, and I want you to take it."

"What is it?" She sniffed at it suspiciously.

"It used to be called *Charisma Cheat*, but for some reason the system now calls it *MySpace Photo*. It's going to trick the system into thinking your Charisma is 30 points higher than it really is. It's going to think your base Charisma is 193 instead of 163. Your Charisma isn't really that high, but when you put the cloak on, it's going to eventually raise your constitution up to 193 instead of 163. This is the real reason I wanted you to wait. The potion only lasts two minutes, so we'll have to do it fast."

"Holy shit," I said. "Not bad when your base Constitution is four. You're moving from fragile as hell to almost Katia-level resilience. That's

going to change everything.” I let out a breath. An enormous sense of relief washed over me.

“Yup,” Mordecai agreed. “Plus, now we can re-examine all her other magical items and figure out what we can lose now for better items since we were using most of them to buff her constitution.”

“As long as I don’t have to wear the ghoulie suit,” Donut said. She glowed as she taught herself *Shield*. “Okay. I’m going to take the potion and then put on the cloak.”

She took the potion and cloak into her inventory, and she drank the potion.

“Hey!” Donut said. “I just got a very rude ‘Catfish’ achievement.”

I suppressed a grin as the cloak appeared over her shoulders. The item had indeed resized. It was ridiculously short on her.

“Oh, would you look at this?” Donut said, spinning. “It’s like a shawl. Much better than I thought it would be. It’s quite light. Hang on. Tell me if they match.” Her new tiara appeared on her head. The tiara didn’t have any powers yet, but it glittered magnificently. Her sunglasses appeared in place. “How do I look? Mongo, how does mommy look?”

“You look great,” I said. “Ready for the runway. What did you get?”

A piece of mirrored glass appeared on the table, and she peered into it. “Oh, yes. I can work with this. I do wish the lining wasn’t cerulean, but it does look good.”

“Donut,” I said.

“Oh, oh yes. Let’s see.” She paused. “Okay. This system is not very elegant. I have to actually go in and figure out what’s being buffed. So, *Bad Attitude* is now level 15.”

Mordecai nodded. “That’s good. At level 15, you can cast it on large groups all at once.”

Bad Attitude was like my *Fear* spell, but it lowered resistances and temporarily drained intelligence, making it so the targets couldn’t cast their best spells. She hadn’t really used it much yet. That was going to change.

She gasped. “The others, I think, are *Wall of Fire*, *Heal Critter*, and *Puddle Jumper*! Those are all the ones with the blinking experience icons. Mongo, next time mommy will be able to heal your wing without stupid Carl breaking glass on your bum. Isn’t that great? In a few days at least.”

Mongo screeched with excitement.

She paused. “Oh, poo, I was hoping for *Fireball*, *Why Are You Hitting Yourself?*, and *Hole*.”

I looked at Mordecai. “Level-15 *Wall of Fire*?”

He grinned. “Combined with her class and her new tankiness? She’s going to be a terror on the battlefield. And her *Puddle Jump*’s cooldown is probably going to go down to a minute or two. And she can do it through walls. We’ll need to be careful with it.”

“What about your skill?” I asked Donut.

“I’m trying to figure it out,” Donut said. “It doesn’t say. The experience doesn’t show in the same way, and I can’t tell. This is stupid. There’s no way to tell!”

“The buffed skill takes three weeks to reach level 15,” Mordecai said. “It’ll probably be obvious in a week or so.”

“Well, I hope it’s not something ridiculous. I have a level six skill in litterbox navigation, and I don’t need that buffed anymore.”

“Level six?” I asked. “You trail litter everywhere you go.”

“That is absolutely a lie, Carl.”

Mordecai nodded. “Okay guys, Carl’s turn to open boxes.”

Donut sighed. “He doesn’t have a Celestial box like I did, but we do need to get it out of the way as soon as possible, I suppose. So I guess we do Carl’s boxes, then we fix his hair, and then we need to start recruiting people. Time is wasting.”

“Actually...” I began as I moved to my menu. “You know what, let’s just see what I got.”

“HEY!” DONUT SAID AS ALL THE BOXES LINED UP BEHIND ME. “I SAW THAT last one! That was a Celestial!”

I grinned. “I did get one. I got it when I was in the demon’s fist.”

“Well, I got two benefactor boxes,” Donut said with a harrumph.

I reached over and scratched her. “Yes, you did. You’re going to be our secret weapon.”

The first several boxes all opened, giving me more of the *Build Trench* scrolls, *Invisibility* potions, *Size-Up* potions, and loads of random odds and ends. I got a dozen of those *Temporary Water Source* scrolls and a few potion versions of the same spell, which was weird. I also got a few strange scrolls, called *Emergency Repair*.

The first of the gold boxes was a fan box, which I’d had access to for a while.

“Huh,” I said, examining the items.

“Wow,” Donut said. “They do not know you very well, do they Carl?”

It was several boxes of ammunition, maybe about 2,000 rounds total, along with an unenchanted leather holster. That was it. The gun belt was a black leather shoulder holster. The kind you’d see detectives wearing on television, and it wasn’t what I’d choose if I was going to conceal carry, which I couldn’t do without pants. It had “Carl” pressed onto the leather in English. It didn’t contain a gun, but I knew what they wanted me to do with it. I still had my father’s Glock in my inventory.

I had no intentions of *ever* wearing it outside of my inventory or ever even using it.

“Thanks, guys,” I said up into the air as a few more gold adventurer boxes opened.

My Gold “I Have the Conch” box contained a group of surefires, which was good. I’d been out of the seeking missile attachments for some time, and I needed to build more missiles.

The “Loot Punch Card” popped out of a gold box, and it was a little piece of paper with five spots with one punched out in the shape of a goddamned foot. It read “Picked up Celestial Items Off the Floor. Fill the card for a special prize.” It didn’t give any more description than that. It disappeared into my inventory.

The Gold Pet Box contained several pet biscuits and a coupon for “500 gold off any one item from any PetScapes location in the dungeon.” I had never seen nor heard of a store called that.

“A pet box?” Donut asked. She sounded suspicious. “Why did you get that? Did they give you that for injuring Mongo? That’s quite inappropriate, Carl.”

I ignored her. It was time for the good stuff. I had two platinum, two legendary, and a celestial box to open.

The Platinum, dog-shaped Tserendolgor box opened, containing more supplies for my automaton table. This was an XL box, making the chest bigger than the last time. It was going to be some good stuff. I knew from the automaton instruction manual that the XL boxes contained parts for a fabricator, which is something I’d been hoping to build for a while. I pulled it all into my inventory.

The Platinum “Hell in a Handbasket Box” contained a small patch depicting a spider.

“Hey!” Donut said, looking at the patch. “It’s Shi Maria!”

“It’s not her,” I said. “Just a regular Spider Reaper Minion.”

Mordecai grunted. “That’s going to give you access to a place you need to stay out of.”

“Mordecai,” Donut said. “You should know by now if you want Carl to not do something, the last thing you should do is tell him not to do it. You have to have me do it.”

The Legendary “Hell Comes to Crawler Town” box contained, like promised, a set of unenchanted bagpipes and a group of three, third-tier

personal space upgrade coupons plus a fourth one in a different color.

“That’s a town upgrade,” Mordecai said, indicating the fourth coupon. “You’ll need it for your castle. You both have a lower tier one of those already from the Tina quest a few floors back.”

“Carl, do we know anybody who plays the bagpipes?” Donut asked.

“God, I hope not.”

The Legendary Spicy Box was shaped like a giant strawberry that made a sizzling noise when it opened for some reason. It contained a simple, silver, unadorned toe ring. I sighed and let it pull itself into my inventory.

Okay, this was it.

The Celestial Heavy Metal box appeared, moving through the room toward me. It came in the form of a full-sized drum kit with pyrotechnics exploding out both sides. The twin bass drums contained the face of Amayon on each one. An ethereal demon creature sat behind the kit, practically running on the bass pedals, filling the room with a constant, speed metal-style rhythm as he did a roll on the snare drum. The pyrotechnics exploded again as Mongo screeched in fear, waving his starting-to-reform chicken wing in the air.

The drum set exploded, and “666” appeared in the air in smoke before dissipating with a little electric guitar twiddle.

All that remained was a single, glittering potion in a bottle shaped like a horned skull. There was a little, hand-written note tied around the top that read, “Drink Me” followed by what appeared to be a drawing of a demon hand giving the devil horns symbol.

“Yes!” Mordecai shouted.

“All that for just a potion?” Donut asked.

I poked at the small bottle. The liquid inside was black and bubbling. The bubbles occasionally rose from the liquid, bursting. Each mini *pop* let out a spurt of color, suddenly reminding me of that space chicken story.

“It’s a Celestial-quality skill potion,” Mordecai said, his voice reverent. He was literally shaking. “This isn’t something I’ll ever be able to brew.” He paused. “Actually, I’m not positive about that. Let me examine it at my table really fast first before you drink.”

I examined the potion.

Hell-Kissed Celestial Skill Potion of the Prince of Woe.

In case you haven’t figured this out yet, we’re trying to kick things up a notch this year. If we’re gonna do this, we want all of you fuckers

as deadly as possible. Hence, this prize.

It's time to bring out your inner demon.

Drinking this potion will give you a random level 10 to 15 Celestial-tier skill. The skill will be combat based, and it will be something you don't already have.

This skill potion is hell-kissed. That means this skill will be any combat-based skill from any Sheol-level mob level 200 or higher.

Go ahead and drink it. Do it. Do it.

I handed it to Mordecai, who rushed off toward the crafting studio.

"Goodness, don't drop it!" Donut called after him.

"I'll be right back," Mordecai said without turning. "It only takes a few seconds to examine it!"

Donut watched him run off. "Is he this excitable because he's Canadian now? I always thought Canadians were always depressed. Also, does he look how you thought he'd look as a person? He looks much nerdier than I anticipated. I always pictured him as kind of a crazy homeless person with a scraggly beard and a beanie."

"He's spent literally hundreds and hundreds of years wondering about some of these potions, and now he finally has the chance to learn all their ingredients and secrets. It's gotta be exciting for him," I said. "It has nothing to do with the Canadian thing."

"I would hope not," Donut said.

I chuckled. "But you're right. He does not look how I would expect."

I pulled the rest of the items from my inventory while we waited for him to return, starting with the Legendary toe ring.

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Well-Balanced.

This special, dainty, perfectly delightful toe ring (which, by the way, must be equipped on your left pinky toe. Don't test me on this) represents balance. Balance in heart, mind, and your physical core. Yeah, I know that sounds like some yoga bullshit, but this has been given to you to save your ass because you're too dumb to realize how much danger you're in.

When properly equipped, (again, left pinky) this toe ring imbues the following effects:

Heart Balance, Level 5. Allows you to store one auto-trigger potion item if health reaches a certain criteria.

Mind Balance, Level 5. Allows protection from Enslavement and Conscription.

Physical Balance, Level 5. At level five, this skill imbues both the Extra Steady Balance skill and the Walk on Air Skill (already obtained.)

“Already obtained?” I asked out loud. That didn’t make sense. I moved into my menu. I knew what *Walk on Air* did, but I didn’t have that skill. It was what Li Jun...

I swallowed, suddenly feeling very, very dirty.

It was what Li Jun used when he fought.

The skill worked exactly how it sounded. It allowed one to literally walk on air for very short periods of time, which was especially useful in hand-to-hand combat. It was kung fu movie stuff, and it required a lot of practice to get right.

The memory of the taste of Li Jun’s eye flooded my mouth. I had the sudden urge to vomit. I remembered what Shi Maria had said after she’d plucked the eye out of him. That I might gain some of his skills. I still needed to talk to Mordecai about all that, about the bottle of ink and the tattoo on my chest, but I wanted to wait until we were alone.

A new wave of guilt washed over me.

Carl: Hey, Li Jun. I didn’t have a chance to talk to you at the end of the last floor. I wanted to apologize about what happened, and I was hoping we could talk.

He didn’t answer.

I turned the ring over in my hands, re-reading the description. This was a great item. I gritted my teeth and slipped it directly onto my left pinky toe. It prompted me to pick a potion and activation condition. I picked a gold-standard healing potion with the parameter to trigger if my health reached 2%.

I also received an ominous notification.

Mind Balance is currently triggered.

It didn’t give any more information than that. I took in a breath. I didn’t feel any different before or after putting the ring on. I reached up and touched the tattoo on my sternum. I felt it rustle underneath my shirt, the sensation like a closed eye moving back and forth, deep in REM sleep.

I pulled out the town upgrade coupon, forcing myself to move on. The coupon didn’t give me much information. It told me I had to proceed to an

owned town to utilize the upgrade.

I examined the small patch.

It was a black and silver patch, die cut and shaped like the horrifying form of Shi Maria, though with a shorter neck and shorter hair. Also, the spider in the image carried multiple wicker baskets lashed over her bulbous body.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This upgrade patch depicts a traveling Reaper Spider Minion merchant. These guys are known for their sense of humor, and I highly recommend the first thing you do the next time you meet one is to insult them. They'll love it.

Affixing this patch to an eligible garment will imbue the following benefits:

Access to the Midnight Market. Safety or Sanity not guaranteed.

You will receive a notification if any traveling merchants are nearby.

Plus 5% to Dexterity.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

I wasn't certain, but I was pretty sure the Midnight Market was a special bazaar hidden in the bottom regular floor of the Desperado Club, which we now had access to. Or we *would* have access to soon. I didn't yet know if the place had been repaired yet or not. There was another hidden market on the middle floor I'd never managed to get into called the Gray Market, which was also on my list to visit.

Like all patches, installing them increased my stats all across the board thanks to my Scavenger's Daughter patch, and I'd need to install this right away.

Mordecai returned, still shaking with excitement.

"I was wrong. I *can* make these," he said, his voice a whisper. "I'd need to upgrade the table a few more times. And we'd need some pretty specialized ingredients." He slid the potion over to me. "But I know the recipe now. You'll want to take it right away. Whatever it gives you, you'll probably need to train with it for a bit."

"Yes, Carl," the potion bottle said, his voice, deep and demonic. "Drink me. Drink me deep. Put me inside of you."

"What the shit?" I asked as Donut hissed.

“That’s how you know it’s a good potion,” Mordecai said, grinning.

“Here we go,” I said as I popped the cork off.

“Bottom’s up,” the potion bottle said.

I drank it manually, which was a mistake because it tasted like ass.

The potion made an almost sexual groan as it dissipated into dust.

I felt a flash, and for a very, very short moment, my vision showed me the burning hellscape of Sheol. I felt the fire. I breathed the hot air. I smelled the sulfur. I had a sudden sensation of worms crawling over my entire body. The feeling was fleeting, lasting a fraction of a fraction of a second.

A small, demon skull-shaped button appeared in my interface.

You have gained a skill.

You have gained the level-13 ability, Gloom Wraith Phase.

“What’d you get?” Mordecai asked.

I held up a finger as I looked it up.

Gloom Wraith Phase.

This scary-ass skill allows for non-corporeal, intangible bursts of speed. You and all your equipped items become non-corporeal during a lunge attack, allowing you to pass through unenchanted weapons and flesh and obstacles with ease. Mirrors that of multiple phase skills and spells, effectively combining both *Path of Destruction* and *Rush*.

Upon activation, you become non-corporeal and rush forward. Any biological entity that is unarmored against non-corporeal attacks is... scrambled. Yeah. This is a good, gnarly spell. It’s really fucking gross, but holy shit.

***Note:* While this is a skill, it still requires mana to utilize. Each burst will halve your mana points. You must have at least two mana points to initiate a burst.**

At level 5, you have the option to designate a weapon or item that can remain corporeal as you rush forward.

At level 10, you have the option to remain non-corporeal up to five seconds at a time with a cooldown of thirty seconds between bursts.

At level 15, the cooldown lowers to six seconds between bursts.

“Carl?” Mordecai asked.

“Do you know what a Gloom Wraith is?” I asked. “I got Gloom Wraith Phase. Level 13.”

Mordecai pulled off his raccoon hat, revealing a balding head, and he rubbed it.

“Guys,” he said, looking back and forth between me and Donut, suddenly serious. “You two have always been powerful, especially for your levels. But... wow. You two are both some seriously scary bastards now. Like *really* scary. You are now both the most powerful crawlers I have ever worked with, including some who made it through floor 11.”

“Good,” I said, “because we have eight whole armies to kill.”

After Mordecai spent a solid five minutes lecturing us on the importance of practicing our new skills, and reiterating the danger of phasing into solid objects, he returned to the crafting studio, leaving me, Donut, and Mongo back in the main room. The chat was oddly quiet, and I strongly suspected pretty much everybody was getting overwhelmed with new spells and abilities.

The high I’d felt from such a power jump was starting to wane and was suddenly replaced with worry. I was glad Donut would have all these new protections, but she and I had massive targets on our backs, and we needed to be extra careful. Was everybody getting this stuff? Could everybody now kill everybody else from afar? If so, that just meant we’d be killing each other much faster. We needed to be prepared.

Step one was making certain all the crawlers were on the same team. And in order to do that, we needed officers. We needed to start recruiting, and we needed to get out of Larracos and into our castle as soon as possible.

I looked over at the guild hall exit. “Let’s see who’s back. Plus, I think I can assign officer status to some of the strippers now.” There was something else I needed to do, too, but I wasn’t looking forward to Donut’s reaction. I wanted to gather some backup before I dealt with it.

“We are not going out there, not yet,” Donut said. She was voguing in front of the mirror. She was practicing quickly turning around, which

caused her cloak—“her champion shawl”—to properly flutter in a dramatic fashion.

“What?” I asked.

“Before we do any of that, you have a very important task. Your hair. We absolutely can’t put it off any longer.”

I stared uncertainly at the bottle of Rev-up Magic Hair Restoration Tonic. The set came with little plastic gloves and multiple cotton swabs. That and a paper, fold-out instruction pamphlet that was really, really long. Donut sat next to me on the table, fussing. “Don’t be a wuss, Carl. You are the number one crawler in the dungeon, and that comes with several responsibilities. The number one crawler simply can’t be without eyebrows. It’s unseemly. Believe me, when I was the number one, it was a terrible burden, yes, but my physical appearance was a priority.”

“You were number one for like five minutes.”

“I was number one for the entirety of the seventh floor, thank you very much.”

My view counter was absolutely spiked, more so than it was when I was opening the loot boxes, which told me this had to be some sort of trap. Mordecai insisted this stuff worked as long as I “followed the instructions to a T.” The problem was, the instructions were convoluted as fuck.

“We’re waiting for Katia,” I said, after reading the instructions for the fifth time. “There’s like a million warnings telling you to not let it touch anywhere you don’t want hair. And these mixing instructions for eyebrow versus head hair are confusing.”

I’d sent Katia a message, and she’d replied they were dealing with the local guards, trying to get into a saferoom. They had Tran with them, who no longer had his magical wheelchair, so they had to carry him, and that was slowing everything down. She’d said they were about to get inside, but that had been five minutes ago. Her team still wasn’t here. She’d promised to come into our room straight away.

Elle and Imani were in their own saferoom now, but they were in the middle of opening their boxes. I’d finally heard from Li Jun, who’d said

they were also doing the same. Florin, too. He was about to come over so we could get him on recruiter duty.

Louis: Hey, uh, guys?

Donut: HI LOUIS! HAVE YOU SEEN JUICE BOX YET?

Carl: Louis. Are you guys inside now? Have you opened your Celestial box yet?

Louis: Not yet. The guard said Juice Box is in the castle, which is still underwater. They drained everything but that place I guess. Anyway, we're at this college place, and they're making us fill out a visitor pass, which is why everything is taking so long. Yeah, it's really weird. But anyway, we were about to go into the saferoom when Samantha rolled by. She's screaming after some woman named Tish. She's saying she's going to kill her. Katia went chasing after her.

Carl: Tish? Who the hell is Tish?

Donut: OMG I FORGOT ABOUT TISH.

Donut moved to a new chat.

Donut: KATIA, DID YOU STOP HER? LOUIS JUST TOLD US.

Katia: I'm running after her. She's not floating, but rolling, but she's really fast. I gotta get her before the guards do something. The college guards are all really sluggish and have a Despondent debuff over them, but they're still going to react pretty soon. I'm worried she's going to get us in trouble. Hang on. I see her. I think she's trapped in a corner.

Carl: Guys, who the fuck is Tish?

Donut: REALLY, CARL. DON'T YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING?

Katia: I got her. I'll bring her back through the safe room. She's really mad. I'll be there in a few minutes.

Samantha: SOMEBODY TELL THIS DOPPELGANGER BITCH TO LET ME GO OR I WILL KILL HER MOTHER AND UNINVITE HER TO MY BACHELORETTE PARTY.

Donut: SHE'S SAVING YOU FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. TELL KATIA THANK YOU.

Samantha: NEVER! I AM A WOMAN SCORNED! MY NEED FOR REVENGE IS THE ONLY THING I KNOW, AND I WILL NOT BE DENIED! TELL HER TO RELEASE ME SO I CAN EXACT MY VENGEANCE AGAINST MY ARCH ENEMY, TISH.

Donut: IF YOU GET BACK HERE, YOU CAN SEE MY NEW CLOAK.

Samantha: OH, THAT DOES SOUND EXCITING. OKAY. DID CARL SHOW YOU HIS PET TUMMY ACHER YET? HE PROMISED ME I COULD NAME HIM.

Donut: WHAT?

Donut looked at me. “What? What is she talking about, Carl?”

I sighed.

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DANTE

Dante read the newsletter a third time. He exchanged a look with Justice Light, his skyfowl neighbor.

“They can’t do this,” Justice Light said. He also had Damien’s newsletter clutched in his shaking talon. “Who’s going to mind my shop?”

“They’ll throw either a bopca or a generated NPC in there, like they always do,” Dante said, sighing. Justice was relatively new to his indentureship, only ten seasons in. Kept in storage between seasons, so it was all still new to him. Everything was still raw.

They didn’t do this often, but it wasn’t the first time they’d reassigned a bunch of the workers for an entire floor. Especially when the showrunners were particularly cheap, like the Reavers.

“But an NPC is going to mess it up. It took me this long to get my shelves organized exactly as I wanted. The generic version doesn’t even stock the important stuff. And what about my art? Will I lose my art?”

“It’ll just be for this next floor,” Dante said. “You can save and backup your stock configuration. It’ll be easy to get it back. I’d... I’d probably take your art off the wall and put it all in storage.”

“We’re not supposed to fight, though,” Justice Light said. “Not unless we’re tenners. They promised we wouldn’t have to fight. I’m marked as a non-combatant.” He looked at Dante. “And so are you.”

“We’ll be snow castle guard captains,” Dante said, trying to sound reassuring. “It’s a settlement, not a boss room. We’ll still be white-tagged. They can reassign us if there’s a ‘need.’ It’s in the contract. They have to pay when they make new types of unavailable NPCs, and it’s cheaper for them to reassign us.”

“Will we be protected?”

Dante fought the urge to laugh. He shook his crocodilian head. “Sorry, buddy. But, look. We’ll be okay. They use us because it’s cheap to use us for this sort of thing, but it’s expensive if we die, so they don’t like putting us in too much danger.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but Dante knew small lies were okay if it calmed one’s nerves, especially those such as skyfowl, who were always on edge.

Dante had followed Justice Light’s season carefully, and he knew the skyfowl very well. Better than he let on. He knew how it had ended for the poor crawler. About how shattered he was. Even ten seasons in, and the skyfowl still had no fight left in him. The creature spent his days rearranging his shop and playing with wood block puzzles, muttering to himself.

And making art. The eagle had a strange hobby of sewing fabric together in odd ways, making these intricate, three dimensional sculptures. The shapes didn’t appear to be of anything in particular, but he’d decorated his shop walls with the fabric art.

He’d immediately recognized the skyfowl for what he was once he started making some familiar choices.

It was obvious when someone had the cookbook, at least to those who’d owned it before.

Justice Light had been an especially emotional owner of the book, but he’d also been a brilliant trap master. He was infamous for killing a shopkeeper during his season, but he’d clearly felt guilty about it. It had been a defining moment of his crawl, and it had started a slow spiral he was never able to correct. People had been surprised when the skyfowl had demanded his indentureship be that of a shopkeeper, replacing the very NPC he’d killed, which was not something they normally allowed. He’d even agreed to a longer commitment in exchange for the opportunity. But Dante wasn’t surprised. Not even a little.

Dante had immediately applied to move from the lockpicking guild to the trap master guild. The shop and the guild were oftentimes in close proximity, and he jumped at the chance to be near his brother.

Dante wasn’t sure why he never said anything about who he was. They barely monitored them when there were no crawlers nearby. Neither of them had the cookbook anymore, so they could talk about it freely. Still,

he'd held off. This season was being run by the passionless robots. The Reavers. They were always lax with their security. So why hadn't he said anything? Guilt, maybe? He'd only written a single entry, afraid he'd get caught. When it was clear those who'd come after him would pour themselves into the book, it made him feel even worse about not leaving more information.

It was the same for Justice Light. Guilt. An overwhelming sense of honor, of wanting to correct his wrongs.

The eighth level was about to open, and both Dante and Justice Light had just been informed they'd be reassigned for the floor. This season, the eighth was going to consist of multiple mountains, all connected with wires and gondolas. The crawlers were a strange type of mantis, much different than the more common ones who sometimes ran the crawl. They could not fly, and they would do poorly in the cold. There was a crawler named York whom Dante was watching carefully.

This castle they were reassigned to this next floor was in a settlement, so they were still tagged as NPCs. Not mobs. He had no idea what to expect. He only had 14 seasons left. He could taste it. Freedom. Finally, freedom.

"I can't fight. Not crawlers," Justice Light said. He straightened, and the feathers on his neck rustled. "I won't be able to. I'll refuse. What'll happen to me then?"

"Nothing good," Dante said.

Hopefully, they wouldn't have to find out. These jobs usually didn't require them to face off against any crawlers. He didn't want that, and if it did come to violence, he didn't know what he'd do, either. He envied Justice Light in his conviction.

Dante had violence in his heart. A lot of violence. But he only wanted it directed at those who deserved it. He was so close to freedom. If it came down to it, what would he do?

Fuck you all, he thought.

Class: Thief.

Race: Crocodilian.

Birth Race: Crocodilian.

Top Level: 89

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor.

Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Trap Master guild. Was killed 14 seasons short of his exit while temporarily reassigned as an Ice Castle guard. Was killed by administrative action for refusing to follow orders.

Author of the Third Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Dead.

OceanofPDF.com

“CARL, IS IT GARRET? DO YOU HAVE GARRET? YOU SAID HE DIED!”

“I did not say that. And it’s not... well, it *is* him, technically, but it’s...”

“In all of my life, I have never felt a sense of betrayal this profound,” Donut said. “Are Mongo and I being replaced? Is that what’s happening here? You’re replacing us?”

“Donut, calm the fuck down,” I said. “Nobody is replacing anybody.”

“Why haven’t you told me about this, then?” She gasped. “It’s an affair. It’s the same sort of thing. You’re having an affair! And to think the other woman is a meatball. How are you ever going to look Mongo in the eye again?”

“That doesn’t even make sense. Will you stop freaking out for one second and let me explain.”

“Explain? What is there to explain? I expected this from Miss Beatrice, but not you. Come on, Mongo. Carl has a new best friend. Let’s go someplace where we’re wanted.”

Mongo squawked in confusion, looking back and forth between me and her.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I said. “Donut, chill the fuck out and let me tell you what happened. And let me pull him out.”

“*Pull him out?* Why? Is he hungry? Does he want a dinosaur snack? Mongo, stay with mommy!”

“I’m more worried about the other way around,” I said. “Okay, Mongo. Don’t eat him.” I zapped the level-1 tummy acher out onto the table.

“Carl, what are you doing? Don’t you dare bring that thing...”

Donut stopped her rant in mid-sentence to stare at the tiny creature.

The miniature, round meatball thing rolled across the table and stood up on his two, stout legs, looking at Donut. He spun in a circle, small mouth agape as he took in the room. He was half the size of my fist. He did not have the same mohawk like these things usually had, but a spattering of black hairs atop his not-quite-perfectly-round head, reminding me of Linus from the *Peanuts* comic. The first one of these things I’d seen was red-tagged, but this one wasn’t. I didn’t know if that was because he used to be Ren’s pet or because of my peace symbol patch plus my higher charisma. He still had the same pronounced underbite as Garret, his single, round tooth sticking straight up.

“Carl, that is most certainly not Garret. He doesn’t even have a name!” Donut examined him closely. “Goodness, what a strange little... No, Mongo! No!”

Mongo stopped just short of gobbling the baby up, mouth inches away.

The little monster made a ridiculously cute, high-pitched giggling noise and shuffled closer to the confused dinosaur and jumped right into Mongo’s open mouth with a hop. He rolled over inside the dinosaur’s mouth, little, elephant-like feet waving in the air as he continued to giggle. Mongo’s eyes went huge as he suddenly didn’t know what to do.

“Mongo, spit him out this instant!” Donut cried. “You’re going to get some weird disease!”

Mongo did not spit him out. Instead, he seemed to contemplate for a moment before he lifted his head in the air and swallowed.

“Goddamnit, Mongo,” I cried, waiting for the dinosaur to teleport away. He did not.

“Well, that didn’t last long, now did it?” Donut asked after a moment. “Mongo, we do not eat people unless mommy gives the order. Carl, if he gets worms, I’m blaming you. He looked like someone who might give worms.”

“Why didn’t Mongo get in trouble?” I asked. “Are pets allowed to attack pets in saferooms?” I looked over to the crafting studio, wondering if we should call Mordecai out. If that thing regenerated, but was still in Mongo’s stomach... That could be bad.

“I think it’s because he was suicidal, Carl. He climbed right into his mouth!” She looked over at the dinosaur. “Uh-oh.” She started to back away.

With a *hurk, hurk, hurk* noise, Mongo yakked the meatball back out onto the table. The little ball rolled out, bouncing and giggling. Mongo made a move to gobble him back up, but Donut shouted for him to stop.

“Ew, ew, Carl! This is not acceptable! Look at what you made Mongo do!”

Mongo closed his mouth and made an uncertain peep. He reached forward to sniff the creature. The meatball made a little grunting noise and tried to climb back into Mongo’s mouth. Mongo backed up and ran to the back of the room.

“Carl, you’re cheating on me with an imbecile.”

I sighed and re-examined the little guy.

Male Tummy Acher – Level 1

This is a pet-class mob.

This pet is not bonded with a crawler.

This pet has died five times. As such, this pet’s stats are all buffed by 125%.

This pet has five weaknesses. Weaknesses may only be examined if you are bonded with this pet or if you have him contained within a carrier.

Tummy Achers, also known as Belly Achers, also known as Colon Worms, are named such because they were originally parasites, living in the intestinal tracts of Jotan-class Titans. They are generally good-natured, though infants can be a little... difficult to control. They are voracious eaters, and when they reach full size can swallow just about anything. They have multiple tank-based special abilities and are generally resistant to most types of damage. They can survive in almost any environment. In addition, while not necessarily known for their offensive skills, their *Wrecking Ball* attack is considered a terror on any battlefield.

They may be dumb, they may smell a little like expired chorizo, but holy shit are they adorable.

At its current regeneration level, this Tummy Acher will reach full size upon ascending to level 25.

This particular pet is unique in that it will regenerate upon death as long as their body has not been destroyed. After each regeneration, they will be stronger than before, their overall stats getting buffed by an additional 25%. They will retain their size and strength upon regeneration except upon every five deaths, wherein they will revert to level 1 and lose their memories. Bonded pets will have to be re-bonded at this time. You must change their name as well. After 10 deaths, their full potential size doubles.

Warning: This pet will not regenerate if it dies before it hits level 5.

Warning: Upon death, they will receive a new, random weakness. This weakness generally results in insta-death. The more deaths, the higher the chance the weakness will be something common, like contact with water. It's considered quite rare for a Tummy Acher to survive past 10 deaths, thus it's not advisable to deliberately allow your pet to die in order to increase its strength.

"Five weaknesses?" Donut asked, scoffing. "So it's stupid *and* defective?"

The thing, still dripping with Mongo goo, rolled onto his back and started making a gurgling noise.

"My goodness, it is adorable, though. Ugly adorable. Carl, this is not Garret. This is a baby."

"I know, Donut. If you let me explain, I can tell you what happened. We didn't have time at the end of the last floor."

I moved to the food box and pulled out what was supposed to be a sausage breakfast sandwich as I finished telling Donut the story. We'd just received notification that Katia had finally made it into their saferoom. They were going to open Louis's celestial box and then come over here.

"We can't keep him, Carl," Donut said as she watched the little guy run in circles around the floor. Mongo had decided he wasn't food after all and was bouncing back and forth, pretending to pounce. The meatball thought it was hilarious.

"What the hell?" I muttered. Instead of my usual sandwich, this was a steaming bowl, with my sandwich within, crumbled up. The bowl was filled

with a thick, white soup. I sniffed it, and it smelled like seafood.

“Chowder style is supposed to be optional,” I said, examining the breakfast food box controls. I slammed my fist against the door, and the device let out an angry beep. “I can’t eat this!”

“Carl, if we’re going to heal our relationship, you need to pay attention to me,” Donut said.

“I am paying attention. Hey, uh, Garret two, come here and eat this,” I said, putting the bowl on the floor.

Both Mongo and the meatball scrambled toward the bowl, but a shout from Donut caused Mongo to pause. Garret made an excited glurping noise and hopped face-first into the chowder. He popped up, looked at the dinosaur, and made a growling noise, the first sign of aggression at all. Donut gasped in outrage as Mongo backed up. The tiny creature disappeared into the white mix and started to devour the chowder.

“I promised Ren I would look after him,” I said. “I feel obligated.”

“First off, if it’s not going to let you keep his original name, you will absolutely not name him Garret two or Garret five or Garret six if you want to be super technical. Absolutely not. I once knew a Bombay named Trixie’s Secret Talent, Take Two, named after her own mother, and let me tell you, it gave that cat serious mental issues. The worst attention whore I’ve ever seen, which is saying a lot, especially for a Bombay. Honorifics are one thing, but being known as a second edition, like a photocopy? Can you imagine? That’s a hard no, Carl. The last thing we need is that thing being even more mentally unstable than it already is. And anyway, it sounds like Ren hoisted him on you without asking. Maybe you can give him to Louis or Britney. They both seem lonely.”

The thing popped up from the bowl and looked at me, eyes huge. His dot had changed from white to orange.

“Too late,” I said. “Man, that was a lot easier than getting Mongo to bond. Ren said we had to feed him a few times, but it only took one bowl.”

Congratulations. You have bonded with Tummy Acher, level-one. A new tab is available in your interface. Bonded Pets. Please see this tab for more information.

Your guild has a pet stable installed. New options are available in your Bonded Pets tab.

Your Tummy Acher requires a name. Please choose a name now.

“Ca, Ca, Ca,” he said, looking at me. He burped.

Donut scoffed once again, looking back and forth between me and the meatball. “He bonded easily because he’s an idiot, Carl.”

There was more food in the bowl than he could possibly eat, and he pushed himself out, using his legs to jump and roll. He splotched onto the floor, leaving a trail of white chowder. Overhead, the cleaner bot made a disapproving bleep. The meatball burped again and then started to push the bowl across the floor, thrusting it toward Mongo, who let out an excited squawk and rushed forward. The dinosaur stuck his head in the bowl and licked the rest of it up in a handful of seconds.

“Do you know who Cousin Oliver is, Carl?” Donut demanded, watching the display.

“Was he that one cat with the really weird eye?”

“No, Carl. That was my sister-cousin, Ginger Snap, and we don’t talk about her. Cousin Oliver was from *The Brady Bunch*. This thing is like that. Cousin Oliver. Scrappy Doo. Guppy on *iCarly*. April on *Gilmore Girls*.” She spat out that last one. “All late series additions. All attempts to add something new and cute and exciting to a perfectly good cast that ended up making everything worse.”

I grinned and gave Donut a pat. “Don’t worry. You’ll always be my number one girl.”

She harrumphed. “I’m sure that’s what they said to Mary-Kate and Ashley before those *other* twins arrived.”

“Jesus, Donut. How do you even know all this stuff?”

Katia came into the room, followed by Bautista and Louis. Samantha sat on Louis’s shoulder, talking animatedly. It made him look like he had two heads.

“We are putting a pin in this, Carl, but I am serious. He is cute now, yes. But they always are when they’re young. We need to give him to someone who’s not already spoken for in the pet department. I don’t care if he’s bonded or not.” She turned to face the others. “Hi Katia! Hi Louis! Hi Katia’s boyfriend!”

Katia patted my shoulder and picked up the container for the Rev Up hair tonic and started reading the instructions. The thing came with multiple trays and brushes. “Let’s do Carl’s hair, and then we can go out and look at Louis’s new toy.”

“We are going to use it to kill Tish,” Samantha added. She made a whistling noise followed by an explosion with her mouth.

“Uh, no we’re not,” Louis said. “I don’t even know who that is.”

Donut let out a sniff. “Samantha, you shouldn’t hold Tish accountable for what happened. That was 100% Ghazi’s fault.”

“I’m going to kill her,” Samantha said. “And I am going to kill Katia for not allowing me to slake my need for revenge.”

“Samantha,” I said. “What did I tell you about threatening people? And how did you even get out?”

“I went out the door, Carl. I went looking for my child, but then Louis told me he was at the college, and I went to kill her before she could steal him from me like she tried to do to Ghazi.”

Ghazi... Ghazi. I finally remembered what all this was about. Ghazi was the now-dead “Mad Dune Mage” from the sand castle during the bubble floor. He’d been the one who had the last part of the Gate of the Feral Gods. He’d been trying to animate his sex doll using the gate, but the whole time he was being tricked by Psamathe, trying to get her body back, who’d possessed the sex doll body. She was only a head because Mongo had knocked her over while she was made of glass and broken her body. Samantha had tricked Ghazi into “marrying” her sand ooze daughter—something I still didn’t fully understand—before everything had gone to shit.

Once Ghazi had realized he’d been tricked, he’d written to the college here in Larracos, asking for help. We’d found the letters. In those letters, it was revealed that Ghazi’s ex-girlfriend, Tish, still worked at the college, and that he’d left her for the sex doll. I remembered that Samantha had some choice words for Tish earlier.

“Wait,” Donut asked. “Did you find your child?”

Samantha brightened. “She’s here! I can feel her, but she’s in the castle of the stinky dwarves! She’s still in the water. Carl, we need to go get my body taken care of, and then I can get in the water and reunite with my child.” She turned to Louis and gave him a hard stare. “But if you’re not going to let me blow Tish up, I’m going to tell Juice Box about your affair with her. I’ll have her do my dirty work for me.”

“What?” Louis asked.

But Samantha was already distracted by the baby tummy acher who’d walked up to Louis and was banging against his foot, looking up at him.

“Oh my god, he’s so cute!” Samantha cried. She rolled off Louis’s shoulder and bounced on the ground. She did a few circles around the small

meatball. “Okay. Carl promised me I could name you.”

“No, I did not,” I said. “But we do need to name him now. I have the window up on my interface, and I can’t get rid of it until we come up with something.”

“Is... is that Garret?” Louis asked, going to a knee. “What happened to him? You doing okay, little buddy?”

“Glurble,” the tummy acher said.

Donut started giving a quick, heavily redacted and stilted version of the story. While she did this, Katia pulled out one of the little plastic trays and started mixing some of the tonic.

Katia produced a towel from her inventory and tied it around my shoulders and then grew an extra set of hands to hold my head steady. “Don’t move, Carl. It’s different for eyebrows and hair. There’s a dozen different types of hair, all with different mixes. That’s why it’s so complicated. Your eyelashes are also gone, so there’s a third mix I have to do. It’s almost identical to the pubic hair recipe, so I have to be extra careful with that one. This first one is easy.” She took the swab and carefully rubbed it over my left eyebrow. I felt the tingle of hair start to sprout.

“You doing okay?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“I’m hanging in there,” she said as she leaned over me, working. “Mordecai is brewing something for me right now. Says it might help with the rehab. We’re going to do that tomorrow, so I’m done with it before the ceasefire ends. Don’t wiggle.” She wiped it across my right eyebrow. She leaned back.

“Good,” she said. “Now you don’t look so freakish. Eyelashes next.”

“...And then after her deathbed confession, she had the absolute gall to hoist her mentally unstable dinosaur murderer child on Carl. She knew he wouldn’t say no because Carl doesn’t say no to anybody. I have half a mind to name him Cousin Oliver. Or Scrappy. He only gets three strikes before he’s out on the street, and he’s already used up one of them by growling at Mongo.”

“I feel bad about her, about Ren,” Louis said. “She died, but Carl figured out how to save everyone like an hour later.”

“She was done,” I said, remembering how she looked at her friend. The memory was like a physical knot in my chest, and I felt myself reaching for it, as if I could scratch it away. “Getting out wouldn’t have mattered. She left on her own terms. Don’t feel bad about it. She went out like a badass.”

“Don’t you dare move,” Katia said. She held an even smaller cotton swab now as she pulled my head into place. “This is the eyelash recipe. Close your eyes and don’t even breathe.” She started dabbing on the edge of my eyelids.

“If you can’t keep his name, you should name him Meatball,” Louis said. “Or Balzac. Like ball sack.” He laughed.

“We’re not naming him ball sack,” I said.

“Goddamnit, Carl. Don’t move,” Katia said. “Okay, now open.”

I blinked to see Donut right in front of me, carefully inspecting my eyelashes and brows. She leaned in super close.

“Hmm,” she said. “The eyelashes are longer than before, which makes him look slightly more feminine. Otherwise, this is quite good work, Katia. Very nice. Your cosmetology skills are much better than your sewing.” She took a step back and looked me up and down. “Is there a beard setting? I feel as if we should try a beard with all those filthy tattoos. You know, to lean into the look.”

“No,” I said.

The Name Your New Pet box remained persistent on my interface.

The small creature had turned from Louis and was now rubbing itself on Bautista’s hairy foot. The tiger crawler also went to a knee and gave him a pat. The tummy acher started to purr.

“I have a pair of stuffed tummy achers,” Bautista said, “but I haven’t tried using them yet. I suspect they’re much bigger than this one.”

“Do you want him?” Donut asked. “I’ll sell him to you. Five gold.”

“He is not for sale,” I said.

Louis snapped his finger. “How about Sherman? Like for a Sherman Tank? Or Tugboat? It fits ‘cause Carl was in the navy.”

I sighed, not bothering to correct him. “I do like Tugboat.”

“Absolutely not,” Donut said. “I will not have you saying, ‘Goddamnit, Tugboat’ over and over again. Can you imagine how annoying that would be?”

Katia pushed the small trays aside and was now mixing the tonic for the top of my head in the large, main tray. She kept moving back to the instructions to make certain she was doing it correctly. “Hmm,” she said after a moment. “Hey, Louis. Can you go out into the guild and grab Splash Zone for me? I’m going to need him for this next part.”

“Splash Zone?” Donut asked as Louis scurried away. “Why do we need a stripper? Is he going to give Carl a lap dance?”

“Well, I am naming him Kimmy,” Samantha announced as she followed Louis out the door. “Kimmy the second. I don’t care what you call him, he will always be Kimmy to me.”

“I do like Kimmy,” Donut said. “But not Kimmy the second. We don’t even know who Kimmy the first is.”

“Guys, this is taking way too long,” I said. “It’s much too built up already. It took us like two seconds to name Mongo.”

Donut sneered. “Mongo was easy because we didn’t know about his family. The name for this thing needs to honor the past but make it clear they’re not a copy of someone. Mongo is a good boy and can handle anything. This thing is deranged, and his name requires a delicate touch. Someone’s name can have a direct effect on the path they take in life. For example, have you ever met someone named Lacey who wasn’t a complete trainwreck? Or a boy named Jason who didn’t think he was always the main character? Names are important, Carl. Look at my own name. Look at all the names in my family. They are profound, yet they also honor the past. It’s a very elegant way to make a bold statement.”

“You have a brother named Skittles. And your grandmother was named Princess Chonkalot,” I said.

“My grandmother won over 70 best in shows, I’ll have you know,” Donut said. “She was one of the most celebrated North American Persians until her granddaughter came along and shattered all her records.”

“You just suggested we name him Cousin Oliver.”

“That was before I realized you were seriously considering keeping him.”

“If you’re going to name him after someone, it should be after Ren,” Bautista said.

Donut scoffed. “We can’t name him Cheater.”

“Daniel is right,” Katia said as she continued to mix the tonic in the largest tray. It bubbled, and a splotch landed on the table. The rock-like surface immediately sprouted hair. “It should be something that Ren would’ve liked.”

Louis and Samantha returned, followed closely by Splash Zone, the short, otter-like water mage stripper. He’d changed from his usual lifeguard

outfit to a leather vest and little, red boots I recognized as something I'd received in an adventurer box ages ago.

"Hi, Splashy!" Donut called.

"Okay," Katia said to the otter. She placed a hand atop my head, and the hand started to shape itself around my skull. "I'm going to put this stuff on Carl's head, but it can only be on for like five seconds. We don't want it uneven, so I have to place it all at once. I'm going to put it on, wait five seconds, then lift my hand. I need you to power wash it off his head when I say so."

"Got it," Splash Zone said, giving a thumbs up. "How strong should I make it?"

"Uh, shouldn't we do this in the bathroom?" I asked.

"No," Katia said. She started to wrap plastic around her scoop-shaped hand. "The room is too small, and the shower isn't fast enough. Splash, make it strong. Just like you do at the club. Do your Wet Spot routine. Not enough to hurt, but enough to clean off his head fast. Everyone needs to get out of the way, and the cleaner bot can dry everything up when we're done."

The bot let out an angry beep from the ceiling.

The water mage pulled himself up onto the table. "Okay. Say the word." He started gyrating his hips for no apparent reason.

Katia started spreading the bubbling concoction on the plastic while she grew more hands to hold me in place. "Don't move an inch, Carl. We'll have you lean forward."

"Guys," I said, suddenly nervous. "I'm a little worried about this."

Donut scoffed. "Don't be a baby, Carl. Miss Beatrice used to get her butthole bleached and her lady garden lasered, and those are much more delicate procedures than this."

Donut and the others moved to the back of the room. Louis now had the tummy acher in his hands.

Katia started to place the scoop on my head when Louis shouted. "I got it!"

She paused. "What? What?"

He held the meatball up with two hands, like that monkey in *The Lion King*. "Sir Rendlegore. You know, Sir, S-I-R like a knight. And then Rendlegore. You can call him Rend. Sir Rendlegore. It fits with the royal court theme, and it still honors the past. Plus, Ren would've loved it.

Nobody could ever pronounce her name. She pretended it made her mad, but I think she kinda liked it.”

“Okay, that is a good name,” Samantha agreed.

“Done,” I said before anybody else could respond. “It’s a good name.” I typed it into the box and hit enter.

Your pet has been named Sir Rendlegore!

“Now, can we get this over with?” I said, putting my head back down.

Katia splotted the cold tonic onto my head and started counting down from five.

“Uh-oh,” Splash Zone said.

“You have two choices,” Mordecai said, trying to suppress his laughter while he examined me. “Keep it at that length, or come back here every two hours and cut it again. If you hold it back in a ponytail and keep it tucked under the cape, it won’t be too noticeable. You can fix it in about two weeks. That’s how long it’ll take to wear off.” He shrugged. “Or, you know, you can shove your head back up Samantha and burn it all off again.”

Elle, Imani, Chris, Florin, and several others were now in the room as well. Elle and Florin were also laughing their asses off.

“I like it,” Samantha said, circling me. “It’s very luscious. You look like one of the guys in your Christmas present book covers you haven’t opened yet.”

“Samantha, don’t ruin his Christmas present!” Donut said. “But I agree. He does look very romance novel cover-like. Plus, if he pulls it back, he’ll look like Alpha Carl who had much better hair.”

“I’m going to start calling you Fabio,” Elle added.

“Sorry,” Splash Zone said again. He sat on the counter eating a bowl of pea soup chowder.

His spell had failed when he tried to prepare it because it was, technically, an offensive spell. As a mercenary, it didn’t even let him try to cast it in the saferoom. I’d had to run to the shower and wash the tonic off. The stuff increased the total hair length based on how long it was on your head, and I didn’t dare use my hands to wash it off. I came out of the

shower with long, wavy, shining hair that went all the way down to my waist. I immediately cut it, and it grew right back.

I sighed and took a handful of hair ties from Britney. She helped me tie it back as Donut went through the room and touched everyone in turn, making them officers in the army. We had to set up the officer hierarchy ourselves, and Donut had allowed Florin to set it up after giving him the rank **War Leader III**, which had changed to **Colonel** after he'd spent some time examining the base system. After some more tinkering, and Donut bitching at him to upgrade himself, the Colonel changed to simply **General**. Most everyone in the core group got the same rank.

Zhang and a few of his fellow party members came in and got their ranks, but Li Jun and Li Na hadn't come in, as they were seeking out a healer who might be able to regrow Li Jun's eye. We wouldn't be able to physically touch Li Na anyway, so we weren't sure how we were going to deal with that yet. Mistress Tiatha, the perpetually inebriated manager of Elle, had asked to speak with her, however. It sounded like she had an idea.

Everyone with the rank of general was allowed to recruit others and give them officer ranks lower than themselves. It also allowed them to command large, separate groups of troops. The strippers were all getting **Sergeant First Class**, which would allow them to recruit and command the base troops, such as the Sluggalos, which were now called **Legionnaires**. Florin had actually named the Sergeant rank "Adjutant" at first, but we made him change it because it would be confusing with the existing Adjutant class.

Florin along with Imani and Elle, as soon as they were done laughing at me, were going to leave right away. They would leave the city and head straight to the headquarters where they'd meet up with our adjutant and start the process of preparing the headquarters. Florin and Imani would stay and get to work while Elle went on a recon mission for us. Once they were set up there, we could use the doggie door upgrade to fast travel from the city to the headquarters. In the meantime, we already installed the doggie door upgrade in our room along with Katia's.

We had so much to do. We had to find some mobs so I could train Sir Rendlegore as soon as possible. Supposedly pet training was accelerated. We needed to recruit, recruit, recruit. I needed to actually look at what had changed for the rules. We needed to seek out and find Juice Box so we could talk. We needed to scout the enemy positions and troop strengths. We

needed to pool our money and purchase as many tier three upgrades as we could. And all of that was before we focused on our most vital task. Destroy the naga team as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

I took a deep breath. It was a lot, but I was glad we were finally starting to allocate some of the responsibilities. I was especially glad for Florin, who'd fallen right into the position of general.

I'd also given Katia access to my automaton table, and she was working on it right now, building something for Tran to use now that his wheelchair was gone. But she had bigger plans than just that. We were going to need vehicles, and she was getting the ball rolling on that.

"There," Britney said, smoothing my ponytail down. I was finally used to looking at the horrific burn down the side of her face. It fit her hard visage. "It looks good. Keep it tucked in or monsters will grab it, believe me."

"Okay, thanks," I said, reaching back to touch it. My temples felt tight, like my eyes were being pulled apart. I'd never had hair this long before. Sir Rendlegore was curled up at my feet, snoring loudly.

I turned to Louis. He had a unique rank, different from the others. **Army Air General.**

"Okay," I said. "Let's go take a look at this new toy of yours."

[6]

LOUIS'S CELESTIAL BOX CAME WITH A PAIR OF ITEMS.

The first was a tier three guild upgrade called an **Airship Portal**, which was basically just an elevator that went up to the ceiling and allowed us to enter Louis's new vehicle as long as it was docked to the base.

The rules for the portal were fairly straightforward. The guild leader, Imani, could designate up to three different personal spaces on the map as airports. There were some rules about suitable locations, but basically any saferoom with open air above it would work. The saferoom in the college of Larracos was, apparently, suitable.

These airports would be visible on the map to anyone in the guild piloting an airship. The airship could park itself directly above the space, and the ship could be "hangared," meaning it disappeared from outside and was stored in a literal dimensional hangar. This room changed size to accommodate the airship, and it worked like a regular airplane hangar. One could repair the ship in the room or add upgrades, and one could purchase additional upgrades for the hangar itself. That included hiring maintenance crews. The ship was always locked to the base to which it was parked. That meant if it was hangared here in Larracos, and Louis entered the guild from somewhere else, and he decided to exit via the airship elevator, he'd take off back from Larracos. It was yet another fast travel option.

But it also came with some caveats. The system basically added what amounted to a trap door to the ceiling of the guildhall. This was a physical

door that appeared on the exterior of the roof of the designated saferoom. Unlike the saferoom itself, this doorway was vulnerable to damage, just like the magic doors to the stairwells on the previous floor. If the doorway was destroyed while an airship was in the hangar, the ship would be unavailable until the doorway was repaired. It was the equivalent of losing a runway at an airfield.

People trapped inside the hangar could still exit via the elevator as long as the guild hall was still standing.

“There was a weird warning when we installed the portal,” Louis said as he showed us how the elevator worked. “It said no airships would be allowed on the tenth floor.”

“Really? Huh,” I said.

“That seems like a dream, doesn’t it?” Elle said, suddenly sounding wistful. “Getting to the tenth floor? I’ve never felt as if the next floor was so far away.”

On my shoulder, Donut stiffened. I reached over and gave her a reassuring pat.

We hadn’t talked about it yet, about the most difficult task that lay ahead of us. But it was always there. Always. It had been since the moment she put that goddamned tiara on her head.

“So, since it’s my ship, and I have the controller, you can’t get to the hangar unless I give you access,” Louis said. “I just gave everybody a pass to the hangar, but you still can’t get inside the ship itself without me. The elevator takes a minute to work, so we all gotta just stand here.”

We all stepped into the circular spot against the side wall in the main space. Katia remained in our crafting room, and Imani had gone back to her own crafting room. It was me, Donut, Louis, Elle, Florin, Britney, and Bautista. Splash Zone and Samantha had also tagged along. We left Mongo and Rend playing in the main guild with Ruby and some of the other kids. I tried to get Mordecai to come, but he begged off. He, too, was in the crafting room with Katia, working on his own stuff.

As Louis messed with the elevator controls, my eyes caught the sparkle of something on the floor. It was just a few pieces of tinsel from the Christmas tree that had been standing here not too long ago. I blinked a few times, contemplating. The tinsel wasn’t supposed to be here. The strippers had cleaned most of it up, and I knew the rest of the decorations had dissipated when we got to this floor because the decorations had come from

the memory simulation. Yet, this tinsel remained. There was a simple explanation. It meant this tinsel had come from outside the memory simulation. Someone must have looted it on an earlier floor. The strippers had missed it when they were cleaning up. The cleaner bot didn't clean the main guild room.

I wasn't sure why, but that sight of the tinsel on the floor... It triggered something in me. As I sat there, wondering from which reality the tinsel originated, I had a sudden, strange reaction. It was like I'd taken a mental step, and the ground was just a few inches lower than I was expecting, and I stumbled just a little bit.

I marveled at our situation. I allowed myself a moment, just a tiny one, to ground myself. To wonder at how strange it was that everything seemed so normal to me now. Every person. Every place. Even every object. They were all either real, imaginary, or someplace in-between, and the consequences of interacting with these things wasn't necessarily congruent with their own reality. We were living in a simulation of a simulation. Reality mixed in with play acting. Real situations with real consequences colliding with make-believe, and the consequences of the make-believe portions were oftentimes more dangerous than reality. All the lines were blurred by this point.

I remembered Pater Coal, the high cleric of the Emberus temple at Club Vanquisher, about how he'd been taken over by the AI. He'd seemed to be having issues separating the story of the dungeon with the reality of what was happening to us.

We all have our limitations, he'd said.

That was terrifying. Goddamned terrifying.

I thought of Lightning Lou. The old dog at the gas station in Florida, left to spend Christmas Day all by himself. I'd curled up next to him on the floor and contemplated my options. I'd come so close. It was right there, the edge of a precipice so deep it almost broke my mind just to think about it.

If you make this decision. Be sure. Be sure it's your only option. This is more than just a failsafe. It's the end of everything. If there's time to do something else, don't be so quick. So you must be absolutely certain.

On my chest, I felt the eye blink, and a new wave of fear washed over me.

"Carl, are you okay?" Donut asked just before the world flashed.

The elevator teleported us into a large room.

Entering the hangar of *Party Planner*.

All of us stopped to stare at the sleek, silver tube sitting on a pair of chopper-like landing skids. All the intrusive, contemplative thoughts were instantly forgotten as I gawked at the thing.

Florin made a noise that sounded like he was trying to whistle. He started to walk around the vehicle.

“What the shit?” Elle asked. “You got this in a celestial box? This makes Carl’s backpatch look like something he picked up at the dollar store.”

“I know, right?” Louis said, grinning. “I haven’t tried flying it yet. Once we make certain there’s a place to park it at the new base, I’m going to fly it over. Gotta make sure I don’t fly over bad guy territory. It says I’m not allowed to while the ceasefire is in effect. The controls are pretty easy from what I can tell.”

“*Party Planner*?” Donut asked. She jumped off my shoulder and walked the length of the silver tube. Her voice echoed in the high-ceiling hangar. “You named it *Party Planner*? And this is an airplane? Are you sure? It looks like a submarine!”

Louis moved toward the front of the vehicle. The entire, rounded nose of the thing was made of heavily tinted glass, and I couldn’t see within. It reminded me of the nose of a b-29 bomber, though not nearly as big. “Yeah, that’s what Katia said. It’s not an airplane, but more like a drone thing. It calls it a tilt rotor, but it’s not like those Osprey things. It has four propellers on either side that pop out the top and to the side when it’s flying. I got an instruction manual and everything.” He pulled a small soul crystal encased in silver. “It runs on this thing. Just like the *Twister*.”

“Yes, but why’d you name it *Party Planner*?” Donut asked.

“That’s what Firas had suggested we name the *Twister*.” He paused, suddenly sad. “I’d told him it was stupid.”

“Wow,” I said, walking in a circle around the thing. The metallic cylinder was about fifty feet long, about the length of a medium-sized private jet. The fuselage wasn’t a perfect tube, but more like a squished oval. When it sat on the skids, the bottom of it was only about a foot and a half off the ground, and the whole thing was about eight feet tall, meaning

the interior cabin was probably just a hair too small for me to stand fully upright within, depending on how thick the hull was. There were no visible wings or tail or rudder or any sort of navigational aid at all. I didn't see the four propellers, but the top of the oval fuselage did appear to have four, rectangle-shaped protuberances on the top. Multiple windows dotted either side, and the entire bottom appeared to be made of glass.

It didn't remind me of a submarine. More like a smaller-sized bullet train car.

"What sort of protection does it come with?" Florin asked, still walking in circles around it.

"It's similar to the *Twister*," Louis said. "I still have my *Protect Aircraft* shield, plus it comes with an anti-flak shield, and I can upgrade the stealth mode of it. There's a bunch of upgrades we can buy, too. But first we have to upgrade the hangar and hire a mechanic gremlin."

Florin ran a hand along the silver fuselage. "How big of a crew do you need?"

"Just one to fly it, and I can program a button to open the bomb bay, but there's room for five crew total. Pilot, co-pilot and navigator, a tail gunner, a ball-turret gunner, and bombardier."

Samantha was on Louis's shoulder again. "I call the ball-turret!" She turned to Louis. "What's a ball turret?"

"Bombardier?" Florin asked, ignoring Samantha. "So, it's a bomber?"

"That's what it says. The middle part is filled with racks, and the bottom can open so they all drop out."

"Are there door guns?" Florin asked. "It looks pretty vulnerable from the sides."

"It's an upgrade," Louis said.

Florin nodded. "It's like a half-sized, half-crew B-17 had a baby with one of those next-gen stealth bombers."

"Jesus, Louis," I said, a sudden sense of alarm filling me. "This thing looks like a death trap."

"Yeah, Katia said that, too. Especially after she read the description."

"Why can't I examine it?" Florin asked just as I opened my mouth to ask the same question.

"Wait, I have one of the stealth things turned on," Louis said. "Katia says I should keep it always turned on. I just turned it off for a second, so examine it now."

Casket in the Sky. *Party Planner*. Tilt Rotor Stealth Light Bomber. Vehicle.

This vehicle is classed as tier three Armor for the purposes of Faction Wars and counts against your limit.

This vehicle is assigned to The Princess Posse.

This aircraft is owned by crawler Army Air General Louis Santiago 2.

You may only use this vehicle if you hold the controller.

If one studies the history of all the societies who managed to wipe themselves out before they reached the ability to flee into the stars, there are a few remarkable similarities in all of them. There's a roadmap that contains multiple waypoints along the way, from certain types of religions to the mass production of projectile firearms and usually culminating in either nuclear winter or uncontrolled biological warfare. It's almost always the same. Sad, really.

Anyway, one of the final waypoints on the this-is-how-they-killed-themselves list is almost always the thing you're looking at right now.

A lighter-than-air, long-range death delivery system.

This usually evolves into something unmanned before the fun really starts, but in the meantime, we have this thing. This is a light bomber that's designed for fast in-and-out surgical raids against enemy forward positions. It flies fast and low and relies on speed and its multiple stealth options to keep it safe. The base model includes some forward and aft anti-air guns, but that's pretty much it. That plus some rudimentary shields.

Seriously. It would take a pilot with gonads the size of bowling balls to fly this thing into a heavily fortified area.

But what this flying one-way-ticket lacks in self-defense, it makes up for in pure, passionate, offensive skill. The multi-use bomb bay can be modified to hold all manner of armament, and all bombs dropped from the main model are given a 50% increase in yield. This could be enhanced even further if you happen to know anybody who can build you even better, custom-made bombs.

Warning: Different dungeon floors have different rulesets regarding the use of airships. It is possible airships will not be allowed at all during future floors. So use it while you got it.

"Casket in the Sky?" Donut asked, her voice incredulous.

“That’s the name of the type of airplane it is,” Louis said. “There are a bunch of models you can buy or build. But that’s this one. There’s another one called a Dumbassmobile.”

I exchanged a look with Elle, who had her trademark *are-you-kidding-me?* look.

“It’s pretty great,” Florin said. He was on his knees at the front, rubbing his hand across the glass. “But it makes me wonder what sort of hardware the other guys will have. I didn’t realize this sort of stuff would be on the table. We need to get to that base and start working on our defenses ASAP.”

“The *Party Planner* itself is pretty high tech, but the bullets it fires and the bombs it drops are still, like, dungeon-style tech,” Louis said. “They said those worm guys that control everything now usually use high-tech stuff when they run the dungeon. I wonder if this is the compromise.”

“Either way, this counts as ‘Armor,’” Donut said. “I don’t know why they call it that when it’s an airplane, but we can only have ten of these things at the start of fighting. But if we steal other’s after the fighting starts, we can keep it. So that’s what we gotta do. Steal all the other airplanes.”

I just looked at her.

“What?” she asked. “I’ve been reading the rules. There’s all sorts of stupid rules about what we can and can’t have. There used to be a rule about guns, too, but it looks like it went away. I guess when they say tech armor, they mean airplanes.”

“It means magical airplanes and certain types of vehicles,” Florin said. “When you made me general, the rules popped into my interface. We can’t see everything that’s available until we get to the base. We need to figure out straight away what the other groups have and how one pays for this stuff. If it’s straight up money, then we gotta assume they’re all maxed out. Also, have you looked at the timed restrictions for when the ceasefire stops? The ‘Ramp-up’ phase? We gotta plan appropriately.”

“I haven’t looked at anything yet,” I said. “But our adjutant should know. Baroness Victory. She’s an orc, so be careful with her.”

Florin nodded as he pulled himself to his full height. “Elle, Imani, and I gotta head out. Louis, we’ll let you know as soon as you can drive it to base. Everyone else, you better finish up what you’re doing and get recruiting. Carl, what’s your next move?”

I grinned at Louis. “A reunion.”

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CEASEFIRE REMAINS IN EFFECT FOR 56 HOURS.

“Carl, I feel as if Florin is letting the general thing get to his head,” Donut said as we prepared to leave. We were headed to Katia’s personal space. Thanks to the new Doggie Door upgrade, we were going to leave out the college entrance which was several rings higher. This would give us a chance to recruit along the way. Katia and Elle were working the chats, and most everyone was already on board, but we needed to physically touch people to get them officially enlisted. People knew we’d be out, but in a hurry, so they would meet us along the way.

It would be me, Donut, Louis, and Britney. Tran and Bautista were with Katia, who was helping Tran with his new conveyance, which I hadn’t yet seen. I had the impression it was inspired by Odette’s crab.

We left Samantha inside with strict instructions not to leave on her own again. We also brought Mongo and Rend, who were already best friends, much to Donut’s dismay. Despite not having arms, Rend had figured out how to get onto Mongo’s back and was riding the dinosaur, his giant mouth hanging open in awe every time he saw something new.

“We don’t really know Florin’s story,” I said. “He obviously has military leadership experience. He prefers to work alone, but it’s clear he knows his stuff. Did you see what he did on the last floor? He made a beeline toward all the military hardware he could get his hands on. We need

that sort of expertise. Imani is good with people, but he's good with soldiers, and those are two very different skills. This sort of fighting is different than what we're used to."

We entered the saferoom to find Louis and Britney waiting for us. Louis was pulling his usual leather jacket on as we entered. I saw Louis's shirt the same moment Donut did. I prayed she wouldn't notice.

She noticed.

"Louis, what is that?"

"Uh, what?" he asked a little sheepishly.

"Your shirt."

"It's nothing," he said, hastily zipping the jacket all the way up. "It was a prize we got for going on that *Dungeon Sidekicks* show last floor. It's enchanted. It increases the range of my cloud attack."

Donut let out an angry scoff. "Louis Santiago Two, I must insist you take your jacket off this instant and show it to me."

Britney grunted with amusement. "I told you not to let her see it."

He shot a glare at Britney. "Yours is worse."

"She is not wearing a t-shirt depicting an unauthorized fan club, Louis."

"No, she has panties with a picture of Elle on them."

Britney smacked Louis as he pulled the jacket off, showing the hand-drawn picture on the large, white t-shirt.

I barked with laughter as Donut scoffed again in outrage.

It was a graphic tee featuring a hand drawn picture of a cat. The image was a caricature of a fat, fluffy cat's backside. The coloring was wrong, but it was clearly supposed to be Donut. The cat was turned around, looking over her shoulder. The words "Donut Holes" in English spread across the cat's butt. The "O" in both Donut and Holes were both images of pink donuts.

There was a tiny, drawn X in the hole of the first, round donut, which was placed right under the cat's tail, implying that the X was a cartoon version of a cat's butthole. It was subtle, but once you saw it...

"Oh my god, Carl. It's porn. This is unauthorized derriere porn! The Donut Holes are an unauthorized fan group, and now they have merch! Merch that exploits my backside! Carl, do something!"

I had to sit down because I was laughing so hard.

Donut: ZEV, THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.

Zey: They paid the license fee, Donut. It's a perfectly legitimate brand, and their Donut merch is doing quite well.

"Carl, this is all your fault," Donut said. "You were the one who came up with that name! Mongo, look away."

I continued to laugh. Donut turned her ire toward Louis.

"And, you. This is bootleg fan club merchandise! Where did you say you got this again?"

"The show *Dungeon Sidekicks*. Uh, apparently every time one goes on that show, they get an item that has someone else on it. And they make it magical so you gotta wear it."

Donut scoffed. "Katia went on that show, and she doesn't wear anything like that!"

Britney and Louis looked at each other.

"Well, you're going to have to take it off immediately. I'm sure we can replace it with something proper."

"Donut," I said. "It's enchanted. He's wearing it because it helps him. You can't even see it."

"How would you like it if someone was wearing a shirt featuring your buttohole, Carl?"

"I don't stick my buttohole in everybody's face when they're trying to sit down and eat."

"Well, excuse me for showing affection. I mean really."

"Donut, you are always telling me about snicks or whatever they're called of you and all sorts of other people. Just a few days back, you were talking about one with you and Samantha and Louis."

"What?" Louis asked.

"That's different, Carl. That's fan art, and it's beautiful. This is a for-profit organization exploiting my likeness for their own lurid reasons"

"It's just a picture of your behind," I said. "It's a cartoon."

"And you know who buys it? Perverts, that's who."

Donut: ZEV, AM I GETTING ANY OF THIS ILLICIT BUTTHOLE MONEY?

Zey: Uh, well, no. If you hit the tenth floor, you do get a stipend, and you can negotiate a small percentage based on your licensing fee. Like, a really small percentage. Though if it goes over the threshold, you do get a percentage automatically.

Donut: WHAT'S THE THRESHOLD?

Zey: I don't actually know. I don't think anybody has ever gotten close. Not even Remex or Odette or Ntumba. Your stuff sells great, Donut, but they anticipate crawlers getting popular and set the bar pretty high.

"Donut," I said. "This isn't important. We need to go find Ferdinand and Juice Box."

She stiffened at the mention of Ferdinand. She shot a glare at Louis, who'd already zipped his jacket back up.

"Don't you dare let anybody else see that shirt."

Entering The Larracos College of Magic.

I took in a breath as we stepped outside. Before, we'd been in the lower level and hadn't really gotten a chance to see the city. Or smell it. The scent of recently-drained ocean was still in the air here, but the aroma of flowers drowned it out. I thought of Priestly, the cookbook author who'd loved this city so much it'd driven him mad to see it destroyed. Now, finally, I could see what he was talking about.

This was like something out of a Tolkien novel. We were in the campus of the college, which took up about a quarter of a ring about $\frac{3}{4}$'s up the funnel of Larracos. The saferoom was atop an alabaster-colored, medieval style tower. Like a Rapunzel tower. Green, fragrant vines covered in white and yellow flowers grew up the side. We were surrounded by dozens of other, multi-colored towers, all reaching up into the sky like crystals, growing out of the side of the ring. I caught sight of an observatory with a large telescope. Another, wider tower featured a stained-glass, cathedral-like ceiling. Louis said they told him it was a lecture hall.

Our tower included dorms for professors, apparently, and the room we'd just left at the very top was a cafeteria of sorts. It'd been a small, round chamber with a draconian proprietor. It had not been a true saferoom, and we'd passed right through before I could fully examine it. Stairs led downward, circling until they reached a courtyard far below. We started to descend, letting Mongo go first.

These towers, I realized, rose up past several other rings. We could see some of the other rings as I descended. These were homes and suburbs,

filled with NPCs, going about their day, living in the shadows of the towers coming up from below.

Actually, no. These NPCs weren't going about their regular lives. The second time I circled around, I saw them. A male dwarf stood on his balcony, a home on the edge of a ring. He leaned over another, younger dwarf, and he was showing the boy how to stab with a sword. Another balcony featured a bugbear woman repairing what appeared to be chainmail.

This would all be destroyed before we were done. Traditionally, once the fighting started, enemy teams weren't allowed to enter the city, but the city itself wasn't protected, and wayward spells, artillery fire, and rampaging gods usually did a decent job of flattening everything before the area was finally opened back up.

And when it was opened, there would usually be two teams left who would fight their way to the castle. The NPCs would—sometimes—finally start to fight back at this point, plus all sorts of different “events” happened at the end, such as a demon eviction or more gods joining in on the battles. All of that culminated in the remaining armies bulldozing their way downward toward the castle at the very, very bottom.

My eyes caught movement. Several fairies fluttered around the outside of one of the towers, placing a large, red jewel atop it. The whole tower glowed with light.

This time it would be different. The NPCs were fighting back from the beginning.

Donut continued to grumble about the t-shirt and the Donut Holes fan club. She asked Britney about her underwear, and she said it featured a pin-up version of Elle along with the caption “Stay frosty, boys.” But the panties themselves increased her dexterity by 10% and enhanced all berserking skills. She hadn't told Elle about them.

As we went down the stairs, I could see the college was also active with NPCs. Elves, draconians, and fairies, along with a smattering of several other races moved back and forth into various buildings and towers. They all had the white dot with green outline as soldiers for team Retribution.

“Right outside the college is the arts district,” Louis said, trying to change the subject off his shirt. “You can watch plays and stuff, but they said all the performances are canceled. And there are restaurants, too. And shops. Lots of shops, but it's not good stuff for what we need. It's mostly

clothes. All the adventuring stuff was down below and got ruined when you guys flooded the city. And anything that was left already got bought up by the other teams or is now being used by the NPC team.”

As we descended, a dwarf in strange armor came to stand at the base of the stairs, looking up at us. This guy had the same dot as all the others, but he also had a star floating over his head, which indicated him as an officer. Mongo reached him first and started sniffing at him, and the dwarf reached forward to pat the dinosaur on the head. He fished his other hand in a pouch hanging across his chest and pulled out what looked like two small pieces of beef jerky. He gave one to Mongo, and he broke a smaller piece off and handed it to Rend. They both gobbled it greedily as we approached. By the time I got there, Rend was bouncing up and down grunting excitedly.

“Carl, look at his hat!” Donut said from my shoulder. “It’s fantastic!”

This was the first time I’d gotten a chance to really examine a Semeru dwarf. All the dwarves we’d met so far were more like the traditional, angry Scottish variety. His body was squat and wide, but that’s where the similarities ended. This guy was darker complected, Asian looking, with a round face and flat nose. Thick, black hair peeked out from under his large hat. He did *not* have a beard, though he did have a long, thin mustache.

His armor was almost samurai-like, but not quite. It was like a wide, open-chested metallic vest with flared shoulders. The bottom of the metal vest moved outward, like a bell, ending just below his waist. His squat legs were covered in what looked like chainmail with loose, flowing, red and yellow fabric strips along the sides.

His helmet was a rounded skull cap, but it was decorated with multiple feathers of various kinds, reaching straight up into the air. In the front of the helmet was a metallic ornament, featuring a wide-leafed fern, which curled at the tip, making the helmet look a little ridiculous. His whole getup made him appear as if he was getting ready for a parade, not a battle.

The wide sickle slung over his shoulder was no joke, however. And everything the dwarf wore was enchanted. Everything, including the individual feathers in his helmet, all let off a glow of various colors.

I was surprised at how young the dwarf looked. He appeared to be around my age. He smiled broadly up at us, despite the **Despondent** debuff blazing over him.

“Honored Warlords Carl and Princess Donut,” the dwarf said, bowing deeply. “It is an honor to have you within our borders.”

His accent was not like a traditional dwarf, either. It was short, clipped Asian-sounding. Not like Tran or Bautista, but similar.

“Hello,” Donut said. “I just love your hat.”

He beamed. “I am glad you approve, Warlord Princess. It was owned by my great, great grandfather.”

Up until this point, most everything I heard about the Semeru dwarves suggested them as a drunk, defeated people who did nothing but keep the castle clean. They rarely fought against their invaders. Something had, clearly, changed. I examined the dwarf.

War Leader Arief. Level 80 Semeru Dwarf.

Commander of the Larracos Defense Force Infantry.

This is an ally. As you are both officers, attacking him will automatically negate your peace treaty if there are witnesses.

Okay, I’m just gonna say it. The Semeru Dwarves have a pretty fucked-up history.

In case you haven’t figured all this out yet, this whole fable with the Scolopendra levels is based on a fairytale. But what is *that* fairytale based on? I think it’s pretty obvious, but sometimes you guys need a little push.

Anyway, of all the peoples in this story, there’s an argument to be had that the Semeru had it the worst. This land, the volcanic level in which Larracos stands, was once a haven for their people. Unlike the Over City and what eventually became the Hunting Grounds, these fertile lands here, the lowest level where mere mortals could survive within the great volcano, were once a paradise. The Semeru people lived here in relative peace. They farmed. They mined. They learned. They lived, laughed, loved. Yeah, fuck you. I like that expression.

But they knew of the gods just below their feet, and like all of us, they wanted to know them more. So they dug, trying to reach them. This was a long, arduous process. A city formed in the pit. Scholars from all over came. Some to help the dwarves. Some to beg them to stop. All, however, came to learn. Soon, Larracos became a rich, cultural paradise. Still, the dwarves persisted. They loved their goddess, Ysalte. They wanted to know her. So, they dug.

Eventually, they found not gods, but something else. Roots. These roots traveled through everything, and they were attached to something they called the All Tree. A great tree that is so vast, it connects

everything. And there, once they hit the roots of the tree, they paused. A lot of people don't know this part. Or they ignore it, because it doesn't make for the best story. The dwarves were seeking the gods, yes. But in the end, it wasn't the Semeru who are to be blamed for what happened next.

They built their castle at the very bottom, along the thick roots. But it's more than a castle. It's a monument. An apology. In discovering these roots, they had an epiphany. This, too, is new to even me. Some things are best left alone. Some things should never be woken up.

When Scolopendra's nine-tier attack came, the Semeru got it the worst of all. It wasn't their fault. But they were there, and they were mortal, and they were devastated. They numbered in the millions before that day. Today, there are less than 10,000 left.

And in the ultimate irony, their great structures weren't even touched. Not the ones inside the pit. The great city of Larracos remains. The remaining dwarves, defeated, took it upon themselves to be stewards of the great, empty city. Eventually, it started to fill again. New scholars moved into the college, finding the old research intact. The halls, the museums. It all still stands.

It would sure suck if something happened to the city Arief loves so much.

Warning: This NPC is Despondent because his goddess is dead. He is unable to worship another deity, and all of his stats have taken a 15% hit. In addition, those who worship other deities inflict 10% more damage against him.

Christ, I thought. That despondent debuff was pretty brutal. Still, it didn't seem to bother him too much.

Donut: CARL DOES THIS GUY KNOW YOU AND KATIA ARE THE ONES WHO FLOODED THE CITY IN THE FIRST PLACE? HE'S BEING REALLY NICE.

Carl: I don't know. Juice Box knows, obviously, since she was a part of it. Don't bring it up.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT KATIA AND PAZ KILLING THE GODDESS? SHE DOESN'T KNOW THAT PART.

Carl: And they're not going to know if you don't say anything.

"Hello," I said. "We're looking for Juice Box and Ferdinand."

“That is why I am here, Warlord. We NPCs would like to talk tactics and strategy with the crawler team. Also, Warlord Juice Box has requested your private presence before we attend with her co-warlord.”

I felt my eyebrow raise. This was the first time an NPC had actually called himself an “NPC” out loud.

But before I could question it, Arief turned to Louis and bowed again. “Also, General Louis. I am glad you are present. Warlord Juice Box would like to solidify our great truce in the traditional manner.”

“Uh,” Louis said.

“Traditional manner?” Donut asked. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Yes, warlord. Through marriage. We’d like to get it over with right away.”

“Uh,” Louis said again.

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ARIEF WHISKED US OUT OF THE MAIN COURTYARD OF THE COLLEGE, OUT THE main gates and past the security guards and out into the city.

Entering Larracos.

“It’ll be more like an elopement than a traditional marriage,” Donut was saying as we walked. “I suppose that’s okay, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make it a big what-to-do. I do like my what-to-dos.” She gasped. “Mongo can be a ring bearer! I already have a top hat and bow tie on me. I was going to sing. It is short notice, but I suppose I can be convinced into an impromptu performance. Hmmm.” She paused, then brightened. “Do you know the song ‘Don’t Look Back in Anger’ by Oasis? I can sing that! It’d be perfect as long there’s nobody named Sally there. Also, I promised Carl would wear pants and shoes for the ceremony. Carl, you do have shoes now in your inventory, don’t you?”

Donut paused as I sent her a message.

Carl: I need you to put your sunglasses on and keep them on. Do you remember on the fifth floor how you could keep track of who was a changeling based on their body temperature? Keep an eye out, just in case. I know they’re supposed to be on our team, but we want to be sure.

Donut didn’t say anything, but the sunglasses flashed onto her face as she resumed trying to convince Louis to let her sing at the wedding.

We exited the front, raised entrance of the college and stepped out onto a cobblestone street. The street was just wide enough for a single cart. Across the street stood a simple, metal railing. I took a step toward it and peered over the edge, looking down into the funnel city.

I looked down in awe. *This is it*, I thought. This is the city. Larracos. City of Dreams.

I took in a breath. Despite having been prepared for this sight, I still had to take a moment.

Each level was a wide ring, with a yawning, open hole in the center, leading down into the pit. The circumference of the jagged gap got smaller and smaller as it went down, until it disappeared into a wall of smoke. A single waterfall fell from across the way, vanishing into the clouds. The fall would hit a lower level, where it would be channeled back over the edge, like it was going down stairs. The vast majority of the buildings were in a stone, gothic style, overwrought with columns and arches and gargoyles. Much of the architecture was of tall buildings with vertical lines culminating in vine-covered arches and gables with curved rafters. Everything gave the sense of time, of spirit. This did not feel like a set of blocks designed for the singular purpose to be knocked over. No. This was a real, living, breathing place, and the sight of it staggered me.

But what struck me most was how clean everything looked, yet lived-in at the same time. Ancient, but cozy. This part of the city clearly hadn't been flooded. Havana had felt like that, too, but that feeling had been much more eerie because all the people living there were ghosts. They were already dead. The city was already destroyed. The toll was real.

A small, draconian boy rushed past, carrying what looked like a bundle of twine.

This is real, too. I thought. *It's just as real as Havana*.

That thought was not a welcome one, especially in context of what we'd already done to this place, to these people.

Arief pointed down the street toward what looked like an off-ramp on the freeway. It was a ramp that led downward, curving toward the next level down. We moved to the ramp and kept walking.

I was struck by how many people weren't on the streets. Down lower, there'd seemed to be quite a few. The college itself was teeming with activity, as were the suburbs hidden behind it. But the public areas here seemed bare.

The vast majority of dots were other crawlers. A group of men I didn't recognize came up just as their names popped into my book of Voodoo. Donut paused her wedding planning to make them all **Sergeant First Class**, giving them the ability to recruit others.

Already, my interface was beeping with others getting recruited. The numbers were slowly, slowly rising. We had just under three days to get them all.

I returned my attention to the city. I could barely see the walls of the funnel itself, though if I looked up, I could see the top lip of the crevice, maybe 3-400 feet up, peeking through a pair of buildings at the very top. These walls were not the walls of the volcano. Those were much further out, probably inaccessible and out-of-bounds. This funnel was nothing more than a hole in the ground.

I wondered on that. The Over City had a wooden floor that had seemed downright rickety in some places. The Hunting Grounds were jungle and had a solid, physical ground. Hell, there was a deep river running through it. Supposedly, if one spent too much time digging up there, one would break through and fall into this area. It was all fake. All game setup. But still, it was important to know how all this worked.

This area was the same. According to the story, it was once just a flat, verdant land with forests on the outskirts and rocky ground, filled with caves and rich minerals. When the dwarves decided to tunnel down to the gods, they burrowed through solid rock, only stopping when they reached the roots of the All Tree.

The dwarf was talking to me, but I'd missed some of it.

"We say there are 66 levels, but that's not true. Not all rings completely circle the city," Arief was saying. We turned toward a long, winding road that led toward another off-ramp. "We number from the bottom up. This is level 49, and it's mostly homes. The one we just left was 50, and it's known for the college, which takes up a third of the ring. The rest of 50 is the high cultural district and museums. There are three rings that are called cultural districts, and this one is the uppermost." He gave me a sidelong glance. "It's more for the fancy folks, if you know what I mean. I went to a play up there once, and I didn't understand a damn word what anybody was saying. The biggest theater is down below in ring nine, called The Piccadilly, but it's still a little wet. My uncle drained it, and it was filled with jellyfish. They're still cleaning it out."

“How high did the water get?” I asked.

“Level 39,” he said. “It drained down to 29 pretty fast, but then it got stopped up. We were going to fix it, but then Juice Box started opening everybody’s eyes and had us keep it clogged. We had water up to 15 for a bit, and now it’s only up to level 3, just enough to cover the highest tower of the castle. Anybody who wants to take that castle has gotta learn how to swim.”

We moved to the ramp, but I paused, seeing the traps glowing ominously at the corners.

Arief followed my gaze. “Explosives,” he said. “In case they get in. We have them on every other down ramp.”

I nodded and continued, still gawking at everything. More crawlers came up. I recognized this one. His name was Ajib, and he was level 51. I’d only met him once, briefly, at the beginning of the 6th floor. He was missing a leg when I first met him, but he now had what looked like a mechanical prosthetic. Donut got him and his companions recruited.

“Why don’t they just jump down the center?” I asked, more to myself as we moved down to the next level. This one, 45, was filled with shops, but like Louis said earlier, they appeared to mostly be for clothing. And they were all closed.

“They’ve done it a few times,” Arief said. “There was another season when the orcs marched down the streets while the Reavers jumped in, using invisibility and *Fall* potions, getting to the castle first. They still lost that season. That’s not going to work this time. Not with the city defense system.”

I stopped dead in the street and looked at the dwarf. “Another season?” I asked.

He nodded. “I don’t remember this, but there are some with the memory quickened. I believe I am new, as are most of us. But some have persisted. My uncle remembers dozens of seasons now. Not as many as Juice Box, but he’s one of the *Jatismara*, and he sits upon her war council.”

There was so much packed into that short statement that I didn’t know where to start. I thought of Herot the cookbook author of the 16th edition, who’d made waking NPCs up his life’s work. I thought of his final, heart-wrenching entry in the cookbook, and I wondered if he’d managed to survive. And if he had, was he watching this right now? Probably not. If he

was alive, he'd likely still be working in the dungeon somewhere. He'd wanted to be a game guide. I didn't know if he'd made it.

It had been what? About a month since Juice Box had made it down to this floor?

"How many of you guys know?" I asked.

"About the previous seasons? About our past lives?" He shrugged. His strange breast plate swung back and forth like a bell. "Most of us know. Some don't seem to understand, but most know. Juice Box says there are different kinds of us, made with different purposes. Some shopkeepers are different, and some of the patrons of certain establishments are also different, unable to understand. The hands of the outworlders are everywhere when you know what to look for."

I exchanged a look with the others, who'd stopped talking about Louis's wedding. Britney was next to me, and she asked, "Does your uncle remember dying?"

"No," Arief said. "We believe that for most of us, if one dies, they are dead forever. We are not immortal like the outworlders."

"The 'outworlders' aren't immortal anymore," Britney said.

"That is what Juice Box has told us," Arief said. He suddenly and abruptly pulled the curved blade from his back, which popped out with a loud *shing!* All of us jumped away, including Mongo.

When Mongo jumped, Rend tumbled off his back and bounced on the floor, making an "Ouchie"-like noise.

"When the fighting starts," Arief said, "I will have my revenge against Architect Houston!" He swung his sword back and forth a few times.

"Architect Houston?" Donut asked. She nudged Rend forward with her head, rolling him onto Mongo's tail. Mongo lifted the tail up, and Rend bowled onto Mongo's back, giggling. "Who is that?"

"The leader of the Madness," the dwarf said. "A Viceroy outworlder. He caught my brother as he attempted to sabotage their fortifications." He re-sheathed his blade over his shoulder. "They say my brother was tortured before Juice Box infiltrated and ended his suffering."

"Is that the guy Juice Box decapitated during the pre-production meeting?" Donut asked. She made a scoffing noise. "I don't like those Viceroy guys. I'm glad they wear masks. If I had a face like that, I'd wear a mask, too."

“That was one of his surgeons,” the dwarf said. “Nobody has managed to get into Houston’s operating theater. That’s what they call his lair next to the throne room.”

We walked for a little while in silence, ever going lower. As we reached level 35, the buildings started to get rougher in architecture. The scent of the ocean lingered. This area had been flooded, but only briefly. These streets were mostly empty. There were more shops here, but none were occupied. I caught sight of a trap guild. On my map, it said it was actually open. The guild, at least. The attached shop was not.

“How much did you guys manage to sabotage?” I asked. “Of the enemy encampments, I mean.”

“We will discuss it when we get below,” he said, “but we bloodied all of them a little. We managed to get inside the inner circle at least once for all of them except the naga, of course. Or, like I said, into the Madness’s operating theater.”

I felt my heart quicken. “The nagas? Why couldn’t you get in there?”

“The nagas are not very good at mass warfare, and they say they never win this game. It is said theirs is a court of assassins, not warriors. If they are to win, it is with a poisoned blade in the dark, not with the marching of a thousand feet.” He shuddered. “Not that they have feet, the slippery demons. Their poisons can kill you in a million ways. Their acids can melt you in seconds. No changeling or spy has ever been able to infiltrate their inner sanctum. No one has ever seen the Whore, who hides behind her veils and guard. Even Juice Box wouldn’t attempt to sneak in. We just attacked their fortifications in quick raids.”

I nodded. I knew some of this. More than Arief did. I’d known it for a while. About how difficult it would be to eliminate the naga leadership. He only knew half of it, and despite being an awakened NPC, he still only knew about the in-game version of the Blood Sultanate

Drakea had extensive notes about the naga people, whom he hated. But Mordecai had also spent some time telling us what he knew about them and their government.

In the galaxy, their people were supposedly as wide and as varied as humans. They’d been humiliated and bankrupted during Drakea’s run in the game, but that didn’t make them stupid. Mordecai made a point to drive this home. From what he explained, their government was like a mix between the mantis regime and that of the United Kingdom. A constitutional

monarchy. There were individual systems all under a central government. They had a constitution and parliament and a prime minister who ran the day-to-day operations, all under a mostly-for-show sovereign, whose name out in the wide universe was now king. But long, long ago, they'd been known as the Sultanate.

Their people were considered mostly humble and wanting to keep to themselves, but several of their systems were now a tourist destination and vacation spot, especially the home planet. They'd once been known as explorers and ship builders. And conquerors. The grand, in-orbit shipyards still existed, but the factories were now mostly owned by other entities, and the nagas themselves were a source of cheap labor.

Here in faction wars, they were basically LARPing the olden days. Drakea thought it was mostly for fun, but after reading between the lines and talking to Mordecai, I was starting to realize their continued participation in faction wars was actually a PR stunt. A way to keep people interested in naga history, which would drive tourism. They called themselves the Blood Sultanate, a name harkening to a darker, bloodier time in their history. The actual participants were of the royal family. During Drakea's time, their leader was a naga who was now the king. He no longer participated in the games, leaving it to his children and cousins.

The current leader of the in-game Blood Sultanate was the real-life crown princess, whose name in the game was the Sultana. I didn't know what her real name was. In the old days, her identity would be kept a secret. It was considered punishable by death for someone to even see her. She sat behind veils and was guarded by an honor guard, who were all sentenced to deferred death for looking upon her.

In the old days, the Sultana was the eldest half-sister of the Sultan, and she would be the mother of the future generation of the royal family. She would be bred until she either gave birth to 99 sons or 198 daughters, whichever happened first. If she gave birth to 99 sons, she would be killed. After that, the 99 sons would start their process of competing to be the next sultan. The winner of that battle was neutered, and the other 98 brothers would basically take turns knocking up the oldest sister until she, in turn, had 99 more sons. Drakea's notes on all this was confusing, and I wasn't 100% certain how it worked. Apparently the gender of the nagas couldn't be determined for a while, which muddled everything even further.

If the sultana managed to have 198 daughters before she had 99 sons, it wasn't clear what would happen, though I gathered she basically became the leader and all her male siblings would be put to the blade. It had only happened once in their history, and the sultana who did it was deemed the Sepsis Whore, who'd supposedly poisoned almost all of her sons.

The nagas were now more "civilized," and the family worked more like that of a traditional monarchy. The current crown princess was the daughter of the actual king, and she was the highest ranking family member actually here on Earth. In the game, she was play-acting as the Sepsis Whore, and from what I gathered, she took the gig very, very seriously.

But she was also a ghost. Untouchable. Despite the naga team getting their asses kicked every single time, she'd never been killed in the game. Not once. They'd have their throne room taken, usually at great expense to the actual, poor NPCs and mercenaries who got sent into the room, but the sultana and her guard would be gone, only to reappear at the end, safe and laughing.

The problem was, these nagas weren't NPCs who believed in the story built around them. They knew who I was, and they would know how important it would be to me to get them out of the game. And now that the protections were off, I had no idea if they would keep the whole Sultana charade up. I did know this princess had spent some time in the naga military, and she had both real-life and in-game experience with fighting. So this wasn't someone to underestimate.

We walked for several more minutes, passing by more crawlers and recruiting them to the army. I briefly met a crawler named Jorgen, a large human with a shock of blonde hair and arms that looked as if they could bend steel. He was a level 65 Harii, which was some sort of barbarian class. The man also worshiped a god named Donar. He pulled me into a tight hug and kissed me on the cheek when we met.

"You saved my life, and you saved the life of my Heidi with that black magic you did at the end of the last floor. For that, you get a kiss!"

We moved on. By the time we reached the ninth floor, it was clear this was the area where we were before. This area had been flooded until very recently. The ground remained wet and slimy, and the Xs of dead sharks littered the map. The floor contained the massive Piccadilly Theater, surrounded by bars, including a few true saferooms. The large theater building sat right underneath the waterfall, and the sculpture-covered roof

doubled as the step for the water from above to land and cascade off the edge. One of the statues was that of a giant frog, and it swallowed the entirety of the water before another frog next to it spewed the water out of the edge down below. There was something stuck in this statue's mouth, and the water was spraying unevenly. As I watched, a group of NPCs were trying to dislodge whatever was stuck in there.

The theater building itself had been ruined by the recent flooding, but even more NPCs: humans, elves, and draconians swarmed over the building, cleaning it up. It was the most active group of NPCs we'd seen since we got here. A Bactrian camel—the first camel I'd seen on this floor—walked on stilts and was putting letters up on the water-stained marquee. It read “One Night Only. Session of Love, the final show before we all die.” In smaller letters under that, it read, “Balcony still closed due to jellyfish infestation.”

“She'll meet us at the entrance to the Desperado Club,” Arief said as we descended past the 7th floor. These were all closed and destroyed shops. Weapons and magic shops. Mercenary markets. All still flooded out and ruined. The only thing open were the guilds and the occasional saferoom bar.

“Is the Desperado back open?” I asked, surprised.

“It just opened back up earlier today,” Arief said. “Our, uh, other leader has already parked himself inside. Juice Box will meet us in the entrance bar. She's secured a private room for us.”

The lower we got, the more active it was. A group of dwarves jogged by, singing a military-style running cadence. They carried hammers and sickles over their shoulders as they ran.

Most of these soldiers were only levels 25 to 40. They were trying, but they were not in very good sync. I felt my lips tighten as I watched them.

The Desperado Club stuck out amongst all the other buildings on the fourth floor. The level was relatively small compared to the others above it, and the hole in the center was filled with water as the levels below it remained flooded. The square, concrete building stood on a group of pillars, looking like someone had taken a modernist building built in the 1960's and dropped it right into the middle of renaissance France. A Las Vegas-style neon sign stood above the large building, but only the red, bottom half of the arrow was lit. The sign did not look anything like the art deco style from the previous floors.

A hand-painted sign hung from a sheet draped across the entrance. It read “Grand Re-Opening. Under New Management.”

We put Mongo and Rend away, and we all went inside.

Entering Desperado Club Entrance Bar. The Headlamp Colonnade.

We didn’t push past the entrance bar like we usually did, but we remained in the first room. It was empty except for a gnoll bartender, who eyed us warily as Arief pulled us past and into the back kitchen. He pressed against a panel in the wall, and it opened, revealing a long tunnel.

Donut: CARL, THE BARTENDER IS A CHANGELING! YOU WERE RIGHT!

Carl: Okay. Keep cool.

I exchanged a nervous look with the others, and we went into the hall. We traversed the long corridor, went through another door, and we entered a room with a dark figure sitting at the table.

The figure looked up from his work, which appeared to be covered with paper and notes. It was a gnoll. An old, wizened, male NPC with only one eye. The name over him read:

Hunger Hammy. Level 30. Gnoll.

Manager of the Headlamp Colonnade.

Before anybody could say anything, the gnoll jumped on the table, scattering papers. He let out an excited screech and started waving his arms back and forth. He leapt at Louis, who’d backed up against the wall. The old dog man pressed himself against the poor, sputtering crawler and started furiously kissing him on the lips.

JUICE BOX CHANGED TO HER FAMILIAR HUMAN FORM AS SHE SAT ON LOUIS'S lap, her arm draped over his shoulder. She was smiling broadly, but I could see the exhaustion and worry in her eyes. She had scars she didn't have before. Her left ear, I also noticed, didn't form when she changed, though after about ten seconds, an ear did finally appear, almost like an afterthought.

We lose things, and we gain them.

I examined her.

Juice Box. Human. Level 35.

Co-Warlord of Team Retribution.

This is an ally.

I knew that level was incorrect. The last time I'd seen her, it'd said she was 17. I also knew the number changed when she changed. Mordecai said there was no way to tell what her real level was, even when she was in her blank form. It was a quirk of high-level changeling NPCs.

Louis appeared terrified as he sat in the only chair in the room, upon her insistence.

Donut had freed Mongo back out into the office, and I let Rend free as well. The first thing Juice Box did after she peeled herself off Louis was to pick up the little pet and pat him on the head. Mongo also snuffled up against Juice Box, and she laughed as she scratched him.

Arief remained in the room, guarding the door.

Britney and I stood over the desk, looking at the papers Juice Box had splayed out for us. Rend stood on the desk as well, gnawing on the end of a pen. I shuffled through the documents. It was a lot—but it wasn't all the papers, I noted. She'd made a point of taking some and sticking them in the drawer so we couldn't see what they said. It was a subtle but purposeful move. *We are your allies*, she was saying. *But we are our own people, too.*

"Carl," Juice Box said. "You didn't do what I wanted. We wanted everybody to be protected. To have regeneration. That's not what happened."

I looked up from the papers. I remembered what Huanxin Jinx had told me, that they'd never let us be safe. "They would never allow it, so we did the next best thing. We made it so we can kill them instead."

She nodded thoughtfully. "It'll have to do." She rested her head on Louis' shoulder. Rend had chewed the pen in half, and now ink ran down his face. I picked him up before he could do more damage and put him on the floor. He giggled and started rolling in circles. I returned my attention to the documents.

Most of the papers were maps and castle locations along with troop strengths. There were resupply schedules, including information on the food market that had mysteriously appeared in "Shanty Town" overnight.

It turned out the existence of the shanty town, a ring of hastily-built buildings and markets surrounding the entrance to Larracos, was a new thing. At least one this large. There was usually a shanty town, but it was never anything like this. It'd appeared soon after the flooding, ostensibly built by the displaced NPCs. Nobody had actually built it. The hovels just sprung up out of nowhere. Since the slums completely encircled the top entrance to Larracos, they formed the equivalent of a new, large-sized settlement.

The rules had been pretty clear that they weren't going to add new NPCs once we'd flooded the town, but it appeared they'd either changed the rules or found some sort of loophole as there were some new shops with new NPCs. None were weapons or mercenary markets or entrances to the Desperado Club, but there were food markets and multiple temples, all placed in ramshackle, wooden and metal buildings. There was a single Club Vanquisher entrance hidden somewhere in Shanty Town, but getting access was tough, and the overpriced markets there were only good for outfitting individuals and not armies.

Even though some version of Shanty Town existed every season, I saw no indication it was ever anything like this. I suspected the size and addition of new markets was a result of someone's Emergency Action Item, but I didn't know who. The teams all got three of the emergency requests, and I knew all the teams were out. We still had two left.

Actually... I wondered if the NPC team was given access to all this stuff. Part of that action item that gave them their team included "full voting rights." Did Juice Box have the warlord menu? I had so many questions about how the NPC team functioned.

I would have to investigate further. Either way, there was now a smattering of new shops in this new area, which was outside of Larracos. That meant this so-called shanty town would still be accessible to the other teams, even when the ceasefire ended.

What I was looking at right now was Juice Box's scrapped plans on destroying the food markets once the fighting started. Once the ceasefire had been called, reps for all the teams had moved in and purchased all the food they could. Before, they hadn't trusted the food market as Juice Box's people had been poisoning all the stock. The ceasefire had refreshed all the food stores. They'd taken advantage of the reprieve and had moved in. So now there was no point to it.

"Who's the mayor of Shanty Town?" I asked.

The look on Juice Box's face soured. "There have been several since it opened, as the outworlders kept killing them, though they weren't allowed to 'own' the town. Not until the games begin." She shook her head. "It's so stupid. The second-most-recent mayor was a gnoll named Theora. Just before the ceasefire was called, Theora got called out in single combat and lost. The opponent cheated, of course. Basically stabbed Theora in the back. Now the mayor is," she took a pained breath, "someone else."

"But it's not one of the invaders?" I asked.

"I wish," Juice Box said. "We can kill the invaders once the fighting begins. We can't touch this guy."

I sighed. "So, Ferdinand?"

Juice Box pointed a pair of finger guns at me. "Bingo, cowboy."

I shot a nervous glance at Donut to gauge her reaction, but I realized she hadn't reacted at all. Her eyes were flashing as she was deep in chat. I was starting to suspect she already knew all of this.

“Are any of the outworlders coming into the regular city? Into Larracos?” I asked.

Britney slid a map over for me to examine. It was a map of the Naga team’s fortifications. It only showed the outside of the building.

“They are starting to, yes,” Juice Box said. “There’s not much here for them, but still they come, mostly to scout. These last few weeks before the rule change, they didn’t dare. Anyone who entered regretted it immediately.”

“I figured,” I said as I started to mentally trace the map in my scratch pad.

“Is Ruby okay?” Juice Box suddenly asked. “They told me she stayed behind, but you promised to keep her safe.”

Ruby was one of the changeling children with compression sickness. “We have her,” I said. “And the others. Mordecai has been keeping them safe.”

She nodded. “Good. I haven’t had enough contact with the others. The rules of this world... It’s a lot. I don’t know how you do it. I attempted a clandestine meeting, and a voice spoke out of nowhere, telling me I wouldn’t be allowed to talk to that person. And each time the blob guys killed the mayor, there was an announcement saying the mayor had died. Most people don’t see the words, but I do. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“I was going to ask you about that,” I said. “Do you have, you know, menus and things like that? Or access to the warlord chat, or to the Faction Wars manager?”

“I know of which you speak, but *I* do not have access. I do have the mental voice messaging system. And I do have the mental words that speak to me in my mind and float before me when there is a change.” She sighed. Then she reached over and booped Louis on the nose with her finger. “But the good thing is, that means we can now talk when you like.”

Louis still hadn’t said a word since he’d gotten in here.

What she’d said registered, and I finally understood the dynamic between Juice Box and Gravy Boat.

I grunted. “So *that’s* why you haven’t murdered him yet.”

“What?” Donut asked, looking up. “Why hasn’t she murdered who?”

“Your fiancé,” Juice Box said to Donut. “Warlord on High, Sir Ferdinand. That’s what he’s changed his name to. He is in the club right

now, sitting at the bar, talking with that infected elf outworlder we're not allowed to kill. This cat has done nothing but cause problems, and now he has been given control of *my* people. He is the one given power over the controlling system, including the city defense system. That elf says it was a workaround to allow us to participate because the cat isn't really an NPC, but of the same stock as you. If he dies, we lose control, so he must be kept safe."

"My *fiancé*?" Donut said, scoffing. "Ferdinand is telling people he's my fiancé? I think not. Where does he get the nerve to even say that!" Her eyes started flashing again, confirming my suspicion that she was already talking to him. She let out another angry scoff as she furiously messaged back and forth.

Juice Box appeared strangely relieved at this.

"What do you mean by 'infected elf outworlder?'" I asked. "Is his name Drick?"

"Yes," Donut confirmed without looking up, her voice still angry. "It's him."

Juice Box nodded. "Yes, Drick. He is called our adjutant. I touched his arm, and he was solid as you or me, but when I attempted to decapitate him, my blade went right through like he was a ghost. He is like the others right after they've been regenerated. We are unable to hurt them at all for some time, but that protection appears permanent for him. He is not really an elf. He has a worm in his brain, similar to the one your rock friend had. But this one is a different species."

"That's called a Valtay worm. I met him once when I got pulled out of the game, and Donut and I met him again recently when we were picking our own adjutant. Look, we have a lot to do, and I'm glad we're in each other's chat now. We have a lot to prepare for, but I first need to know how you guys are planning on defending yourself. What's the city defense system? And I need to talk to Gr... the other warlord to make sure we're on the same page."

She nodded. She slid off Louis's lap and started to change form. She went back to the grizzled, elderly gnoll. Instead of a missing ear, this one had a missing eye.

Donut: LOUIS, TELL HER SHE'S PRETTY. YOU HAVEN'T SAID ONE WORD TO HER, AND I THINK SHE'S STARTING TO

GET NERVOUS YOU DON'T LIKE HER ANYMORE. YOU'RE ABOUT TO GET MARRIED.

Juice Box, now standing, put a pair of fuzzy arms back around Louis's shoulder. He remained awkwardly sitting in the chair, his eyes wide as saucers. He wasn't moving at all, like he was terrified, giving the impression he was standing upon a landmine. He, too, I realized was in chat, eyes flashing.

Carl: Louis, are you okay?

Louis: Dude. She's messaging me non-stop, talking about how we have to get married to make sure our houses are 'bonded.' It's all *Game of Thrones* shit, and it's freaking me out.

Carl: You don't have to do this. We can find another way. It's completely unnecessary. She'll understand.

Louis: I already told her I would. It's... it's okay, I think. She's different in the messages than she is out loud. She's pretending to be all confident, but she's not. Man, I think she's really, really scared. She's in over her head I think.

Carl: We're all in over our heads. You don't have to actually marry her.

Louis: She thinks it's important. We need them on our side, and if this helps, I'll do it. If they turn against us, we're screwed. This will help. We need each other.

Donut: PLUS YOU LOVE HER, RIGHT?

Louis: Yeah. Sure. Of course.

Donut: OKAY, THEN. BUT DON'T TELL US. TELL HER. AND DON'T BE ALL CARL ABOUT IT. BE ROMANTIC.

Louis was shaking and sweating. His five player killer skulls looked so ridiculous, so out-of-place over his head that I felt angry every time I saw them. But then the crawler took a breath, stood, and he took Juice Box's hand in his own.

"Juice Box and I need to strengthen the bond," Louis said out loud. "We should get married right away." He moved as if he was about to kiss her, but then paused. "Can you, like, turn into something else for a second?"

Juice Box squealed in delight, which was uncharacteristic of both her current form and her regular personality. She turned into a blonde human. Different from her regular, human form. I couldn't tell who she was supposed to be. It was like a mix between Taylor Swift and Iggy Pop. Then

a cheerleader suit formed on her body. I still didn't know who she was supposed to be. She reached up and kissed Louis full on the lips.

Donut: SAY YOU LOVE HER.

"I love you," Louis said, his lips still smashed on hers.

Donut gasped with delight.

Donut: THIS IS THE MOST ROMANTIC THING I'VE EVER SEEN. DO IT. DO IT, LOUIS.

Louis: Uh, do what?

Donut: HAVEN'T YOU WATCHED GOSSIP GIRL? SAY IT TWICE.

Louis: Say what twice?

Donut: GODDAMNIT LOUIS, DON'T RUIN THIS FOR ME.

"I love you?" he repeated.

I exchanged a look with Arief, who remained guarding the door. He looked as skeptical as I was. This wasn't the middle ages. A marriage seemed preposterous and pointless in these circumstances, especially if Louis wasn't really into it. I knew Louis really liked her, but she was a goddamned NPC.

Still, he was correct in one thing. If it did keep the NPC team on our side, then it wasn't a terrible idea. I just hoped all of this wouldn't blow up in our face.

Britney, who'd ignored all of this, looked up from the desk, where she'd been carefully studying the papers. She tapped a piece of paper. "How big are these diggers?"

Juice Box pulled back from Louis and grinned at the other woman. "Oh, my dear. Have you not seen dwarven automatons before?"

“THANK GOD,” I SAID, COMING INTO THE ENTRANCE VESTIBULE FOR THE Desperado Club. “Clarabelle! I thought you were dead!”

When Minge the demon had demolished the Desperado Club, I’d assumed all the guards had been killed. I was glad to see the ever-present bouncer sitting in her regular chair, looking grumpy as ever.

The female crocodilian glared at me and Donut. “I’m not, no thanks to you. You four are banned. By order of the new management. The NPCs can still go in.”

“What?” Donut demanded. “Banned from the Desperado Club? Is that a joke? We’re about to have a wedding inside. We were going to invite you! Mongo is going to be a ring bearer, and I’m going to sing!”

The crocodilian was not impressed. “It’s not just you, if that makes you feel better. It’s *because* of you, but it’s not just you. New management wants his first few days to go smoothly, so he’s banned all crawlers. If he ever un-bans the crawlers, then we’ll talk.”

“I wasn’t even there for the demon thing. This is an outrage!”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I said. “If crawlers can’t get in at all, then what’s the point of the club?”

Clarabelle shrugged. “I just do what I’m told. Try again in a few days. Maybe he’ll have changed his mind. But I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

It was me, Donut, Louis, Britney, Arief, and Juice Box, who’d taken on the form of a female draconian. We’d put Mongo and Rend away.

“Who is the new manager?” Donut demanded. “I wish to speak to him this instant!”

“He’s asked not to be disturbed. It’s not anybody you know,” Clarabelle said. “He is very particular. Very serious about security. I’m lucky I still have my job. All the surviving cretins and sai got airlocked and sent off to the mercenary markets.” She leaned in. “Look, I know that whole demon thing wasn’t entirely your fault. But this new guy is filling the club with more security measures than I’ve ever seen. He has a whole slew of bodyguards with him at all times.” She made a quick, upward motion with her small eyes. “Not exactly NPCs. Not exactly former crawlers. That’s all I can say.”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Hamed.”

I tried not to react. I knew that name. I knew exactly who this was. My elbow suddenly throbbed, and I remembered Astrid’s last words before Katia and I had assassinated her. They still haunted me.

I was almost done.

Hamed was the real name of the Night Wyrn. The leader of the Guild of Suffering. Husband to the late Astrid and father to the strippers Damascus Steel and Anaconda, both of whom were still, supposedly, somewhere in the club, hunting him. Hunting their own father.

All of that had to wait. Right now we had to get to Gravy Boat. “Look,” I said. “There’s someone in there we gotta talk to. Is there any way you can...”

I paused as a harried-looking Dream elf appeared, stepping out into the vestibule from within the club.

I recognized the man.

Drick.

Adjutant for Team Retribution.

This is a non-combatant observer.

Drick carried a tablet computer in one hand and a drink in another. He nodded at me as he pushed his way deeper into the vestibule, which was suddenly very crowded.

At least, he *tried* to nod at me. He couldn’t fully move his head.

He had a large, orange cat sitting directly atop his bald dome.

Warlord on High, Sir Ferdinand. Cat. Level 100.

Co-Warlord of Team Retribution.

This is an ally.

The last time I'd seen the cat, he'd been wearing a ridiculously-large turban with a massive feather. Now he wore a gold chain around his neck with a small, jeweled charm and what appeared to be a circle of white, thin paper tissues wrapped around his head. One end sagged pitifully, about to fall off.

I felt myself staring at the thing on his head, trying to figure out what it was. It was like he'd attempted to recreate the turban using literal toilet paper.

Donut jumped to my shoulder so she was eye-to-eye with the cat.

"Hey, baby girl," Ferdinand said.

"Don't you baby girl me," Donut snapped, pointing a paw at him. "Remember what we talked about? Do it. Do it now."

Ferdinand looked down, appearing abashed. Some of the tissue on his head unraveled and landed on Drick's face, covering his eyes. The elf pushed it away. "Come on, babe. I was trying to be romantic."

"Do you want me to pull out Mongo? I'll pull him out right now."

The orange cat sighed. "I'm not really her fiancé," he said. He looked up and winked at me. "Not yet at least."

Donut scoffed. "I would rather have a sexual affair with the bloating corpse of a syphilis-infested cocker spaniel than even consider having a relationship with you. I don't know what I ever saw in you."

"Is that a way to talk to a fellow warlord?"

"And what do you have on your head? Take that off this instant!"

He sheepishly pawed at his head, removing the tissue. It stuck to his claw, and he wiped it free using the side of Drick's face. "It was just a temporary hat. Gotta keep my head warm. Did you get my trade request?"

"We did," Donut said. "And we rejected it immediately. Didn't we, Carl?"

"Uh," I said. I remembered seeing the notification, but I'd forgotten about it.

"I just want my Simoom and my hat. Is that so much to ask?"

"Your hat?" I asked. "Wait... Simoom? Is that your rhinoceros mount? We haven't been to our headquarters yet. We don't know if we even have the thing."

"You have her. Kibben stole her right from me, and I demand satisfaction! We landed here, and everybody was fighting and running, and

he wouldn't let me take her."

I wasn't certain who Kibben was, though I remembered there'd been a high-elf stablemaster at the castle before we'd transferred it here to Larracos.

"Look, if we can get your mount back, that's fine," I said. "But if you lost your hat..."

"I have your stupid hat, but it's not with me," Donut said. "You want it back? Then you have to stop being so disgusting. And you have to change the name of our alliance."

Carl: Do you really have his hat?

Donut: YES, CARL. I TOLD YOU I FOUND IT AFTER THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE.

I vaguely remembered something she'd messaged me while drunk at the Christmas party, but I hadn't realized she was talking about his hat.

This whole time, Juice Box sat there, eyes flashing as she conversed with Drick. Ferdinand appeared oblivious as he went back and forth with me and Donut.

"We'll give you your hat back tomorrow or the next day," I said. "I can't promise anything about the mount until I talk to the others, but I will do my best. But I do want something from you."

The orange cat grunted. "You want something from the Ferdinand and Juicy-Juice without giving anything up? I think not."

"If you call me that again, I will neuter you with my teeth," Juice Box said.

I went through my inventory and spied something I hadn't given Donut yet. She was about to be pissed. "How about a temporary replacement hat? You'll have to give it back when we get you your turban."

"What hat?" Donut demanded.

I pulled out the black, weathered bowler hat. It'd been in Quan's inventory. One could throw it, have it decapitate an enemy, and it'd boomerang back to the owner. Both Donut and Ferdinand gasped at the same time when they saw it.

I caught eyes with Juice Box, and she nodded. We'd already discussed this, and I knew she was on board after having conversed with Drick. The plan had been for her to convince Gravy Boat to help us, but this was better.

Ferdinand reached a paw toward the hat, but I pulled it back. "I want to be mayor of that town. Shanty Town. You'll have to transfer your

mayorship to us, which means that jewel on your necklace will go away. You'll get this hat, and we'll trade it back for your turban in a day or so. We'll try to get your rhino back if we still have it. If not, we'll figure something out. We're allies.

The Princess Posse has made a trade request with Team Retribution.

Before he could accept or deny the invite, I reached over and placed the bowler hat on the cat's head. It resized itself and sat at an angle. Without a word of encouragement, Britney pulled a hand mirror from her inventory as Ferdinand admired himself.

"It won't let me transfer the town without you giving us some money," Ferdinand said.

"That's okay," I said. "We have gold."

But the cat wasn't even listening to me. He adjusted the hat. "I'm a very handsome boy."

I met eyes with Drick as the cat on his head continued to pose. The elf's mouth turned upward in an unreadable expression. It was like a mixture of annoyance, exasperation, and panic.

Trade Request has been accepted.

Your Truce with Team Retribution has been renamed to "The Good Guys."

Clarabelle grunted. "Can't say it's been boring since you guys showed up. That's for sure."

"I'm a very handsome boy," Ferdinand repeated.

Changeling weddings, as it turned out—much to Louis' relief—were two-part affairs. The "small wedding" occurred first, which was a simple, private ceremony, and it was what we were doing right now.

We'd returned to the grimy entrance bar. We moved a table aside and allowed Juice Box and Louis to stand in the center, holding hands. Juice Box returned to her blank form. I didn't see any damage to her body in this form, and I wondered on that.

It said she was level 120. I wondered on that, too.

Donut was angry to learn there'd be no rings, no ring bearers, and no singing. There was no pastor or officiant. It was just Louis and Juice Box and a small group of people watching, including Drick and Ferdinand, who hadn't left the elf's head. Mongo and Rend played in the room. Arief guarded the door. The gnoll-but-really-a-changeling bartender remained behind the bar, watching.

The whole thing went fast.

The "Confirmation," which was the second part of the wedding, would happen in about a month. Donut scoffed at the idea. It seemed so far away. Mordecai explained in chat that in changeling culture, most married couples needed a full month to decide if they really were compatible. Most of their weddings were arranged, and part of the small wedding actually included signing divorce papers, which expired in a month if they weren't filed in time. During this first month, the couple were legally married, but if one of them decided to file the divorce, there would be no consequences, and the marriage would basically get annulled. But in the meantime, this first wedding was the legal one. Once this small wedding ceremony was over, that was it. Juice Box and Louis would be married fair and square.

The Confirmation was a big event and was much more like what everybody considered a traditional wedding. Here there would be guests and food and gifts and singing. Donut was already in chat, loudly preparing for the party.

I kept my attention on Louis, as I watched him stand there awkwardly. I worried about him.

He caught me staring at him, and he gave me a quick smile.

"I wish my mom was here," he whispered.

Everybody's views were absolutely spiked as the crawler and NPC whispered made-up-on-the-spot vows to each other. They whispered them in each other's ears, so nobody else would hear. They would repeat them out loud at the Confirmation.

And that was it. They were married.

"Congrats, guys," I said as Donut cheered enthusiastically. Britney clutched onto a pile of automaton plans and hadn't been paying attention.

Zey: Well, that was a first.

Donut looked at me. "I hope Samantha won't be too mad she missed the first ceremony."

Before I could answer, my warlord interface started to rapidly blink. These were all new recruit notifications. I exchanged a look with Donut, who'd also paused at the influx of notifications. It was so many, I had to mute it. I was about to send a message asking what the hell was going on when Florin messaged me.

Florin: Mate, I am about to blow your fucking mind. You need to get your ass to the headquarters. We've secured the saferoom here, so you can use the doggie door. There's a large group of people here who would really like to meet you.

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TIPID

“Can I keep this?” Tipid asked his attorney. His hands shook as he turned the key over in his blood-covered hands.

He sat in the chair, but he could barely feel his legs. He still shook. *Is this real?* he wondered. *Am I really here, or is this another trick?* The Illusionists were still out there, casting their spells. Cassio was dead. He’d stabbed himself in the neck, fighting illusions, screaming for them to get off of him. It’d left just him and Horatio. And now Horatio was dead, too. He was dead because the key only let one of them out, and Tipid had chosen to save himself.

“Tipid,” the man said. “It’s Damien. I’m not your attorney. You’re in a zero zone, and you have some lingering injuries that need to be repaired. It’s brain lesions or something, I don’t know. You need to get straight to a Viceroy system to get it repaired. I’ve already arranged for transport. It’s going to cost a good chunk of your pension, but I don’t see what choice you have.”

Tipid blinked, and he realized his hands weren’t really bloody. The man in front of him wasn’t his attorney. That had already happened. That was solars ago.

“I’m never getting out of here,” Tipid said. He looked at his hands again. Why were they so clean?

The man—a hair-covered human—smiled at him. He smiled the way a merchant would smile. A merchant who was forced to deal with a customer he despised. “No, no, that’s not true,” the man said. “You did it. You fulfilled your contract. Game guide. Poisoners guild. Occasional city guard. Perfect marks. You didn’t negotiate post-release health care, unfortunately,

and some of the physical injuries to your body persist. So when you're outside the dungeon environment," he waved a hand at Tipid, "this will happen. But you're free. You're going home."

"Home? Where is that?"

"There's an organization. A not-for-conquest that helps destitute former crawlers and employees get their footing after transition. It's pretty new, but the Syndicate has donated some money to the cause once they started getting press. I've taken the liberty of letting them know you're coming. They're sending someone to accompany you to the Viceroy system. He's a former crawler himself."

"Viceroys?" Tipid asked, suddenly afraid. His mind was in a fog. What was happening? He remembered the Viceroys. The masked monsters during faction wars. They called themselves the Madness. Their chief surgeon had a spell that cooked your brain. It made your teeth fall out. It made the liquid in your eyeballs turn to acid and then explode over your own face. That was what had happened to Rosaline.

"What about the key?" Tipid turned it over in his hands again, and he realized it was attached to a chain around his neck. When had that happened?

"They let you keep it. You negotiated an extra season just so you could have it. It's yours."

He could still hear Horatio's cries. The other man hadn't understood what was happening, why Tipid was leaving him behind. He remembered the feeling of the jewel burning out as he stuck the key into the door. Of the notification. Horatio had a wife. An older child. They'd both survived and had already taken a deal at the end of the tenth. Horatio had held on in hopes of getting a better deal, of making a life for them when they finally got out.

Tipid had nobody.

He was all alone in the world. In the universe. Yet, he'd chosen to save himself and not his friend. *That's okay*, everybody said to him. *It's okay to be selfish when you're saving yourself.*

He yanked on the key, and he felt the chain snap. He tossed the necklace across the table.

"I don't want it anymore."

Class: Poisoner.

Race: Crest.

Birth Race: Crest.

Top Level: 96

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 12th floor.

Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Poisoner guild before exiting the dungeon. Was forced to spend the entirety of his pension, plus take out an additional loan, to repair the extensive damage to his brain. Eventually retired to a Crest system to work for a waste management company.

Author of the Fourth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Colonel in the Princess Posse Faction Wars team.

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LOUIS LEFT HIS NEW WIFE BEHIND AS HE, KATIA, AND BAUTISTA TOOK *Party Planner* on its inaugural journey toward the base. Samantha had somehow talked her way onto the flight as well. It wasn't clear if anyone had told her yet about the wedding. Ferdinand and Drick had turned back to the Desperado Club. Drick, apparently, was attempting to teach the cat how to use the warlord menus, but Ferdinand was proving to be a ...difficult... student. In the meantime, Drick left Juice Box alone to get back to her work preparing the NPCs for the impending invasion.

Tran had just gotten an upgraded wheelchair, but I hadn't a chance yet to see what Katia built for him. We left Britney with Juice Box as she received a lesson on how the city defense system worked. There was only so much Juice Box could do until the cat figured out his menus. But in the meantime, the changeling warlord could control the two enormous diggers, which were only part of the defenses. Apparently there was a way to use the buildings themselves to help defend the city.

We hadn't yet installed the upgrade for the doggie door to work throughout the entire guild, so we had to go over to the Meadowlark space to get to the base. Rend rode upon Mongo's back as they bounded ahead of us.

"I do hope Juice Box and Louis get time for a honeymoon. It's sad they got married and then had to separate right away," Donut said as we walked.

“I must say, I am surprised she just let us take control of the other city away from Ferdinand.”

“If the bad guys can freely enter that Shanty Town once the truce is broken, it’s just going to be a liability. It has a separate defense system. In the meantime, we both have something that’s going to give all those assholes a huge headache. It’s a good deal for both of us.”

Donut sneered. “Still, I can’t believe that stupid cat gave it all away just for a temporary hat. He’s not even charmed anymore, and it still worked. We better get that hat back, Carl. I want to put it on my charge pillow and get that boomerang skill for my new tiara. Plus, it’s a bowler hat. I don’t have any bowler hats yet.”

“That’s the plan,” I said. “And we’re going to drain that lightning spell out of the turban, too. But I want to warn Juice Box before we do it in case Gravy Boat flips out. Something tells me she won’t mind.”

We had so much to do. I needed to get Rend leveled up. I needed to figure out how to use my new Gloom Wraith Phase skill. But first we needed to see what Florin was all excited about.

“Hey!” Donut suddenly shouted. “I just got a notification that my sponsorship has been canceled!”

“Really? Which one?”

“The garbage truck people! It says because of a ‘conflict of interest.’ Carl, what does that mean? What did you do?”

“Huh,” I said. “At least you opened the loot box from them already.”

“It says there’s going to be an auction for a new one.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll get you something good, too.”

“I hope so. As much as I appreciate the loot, I do hope it’s something that lines up properly with my brand this time. With that toy company Veriluxx being a dud and Empress D’Nadia selling my sponsorship, it would be nice to have something to complement the Apothecary, even if she does sponsor half the dungeon.”

We entered the Meadowlark saferoom.

And just like that, everything changed.

Imani, Florin, and Mistress Tiatha were inside, waiting for us.

They weren't alone.

I stopped dead as I entered the space. I stared at the two Crest standing there. A woman and a man. Mongo jumped all around them, peeping with excitement at meeting someone new. The man stood there, grinning stupidly while the woman scowled at the dinosaur.

On the minimap, their dots were purple. The same color as the dots of the hunters on the sixth floor, but they had a pink outline, indicating them as troopers for the Princess Posse.

"Rosetta!" Donut exclaimed. "Carl, look! It's Rosetta Thagra! What are you doing here?"

Rosetta appeared much like she had the last time I'd seen her, only now she wore black shorts, boots, and a simple, unenchanted leather top over her chest. The floral tattoo on her right leg glowed. The tendrils peeked out onto her left arm, implying the tattoo went all the way up over her stomach and across her chest. The tat hadn't been glowing when I saw it before. She didn't wear anything on her bald head. She didn't appear to be carrying any weapons.

Rosetta. Rosetta from the *Shadow Boxer* television show. Rosetta from the seventh edition of the cookbook.

"How?" I asked.

The name over her head blazed.

Rosetta Thag. Crest Barn Burner. Level 60.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

The name and description surprised me so much that it took me a second to finally examine the second stranger standing there.

This was also a Crest, but he was noticeably older than Rosetta. In appearance, at least. He was tall, thin, and he had an old scar running up over his bald head, from temple to temple that made him look as if he'd been literally scalped once. While Rosetta's skin was pale, almost sickly, this guy's skin was leathery and golden brown, like he spent most of his time working under a blazing sun.

I knew it wasn't accurate, but Rosetta's appearance was that of someone who'd never worked a day in her life. This newcomer's appearance suggested he'd spent a life filled with hard labor.

I felt myself stagger when I read his name, like I'd been physically pushed. My back hit the entrance to the personal space. The door opened,

and I almost stumbled back into the guild. Donut yowled and jumped from my shoulder onto Mongo, causing Rend to tumble off the dinosaur's back. The little meatball giggled as it fell and splotted onto the floor.

Tipid. Crest Liquid Dervish. Level 60.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

Tipid. Author of the fourth edition of the cookbook.

"How," I repeated. My legs felt weak.

And then I remembered all the notifications that I'd muted. I met eyes with the man. "Are there more?"

I was asking two different things, and I saw he could tell what I meant. What I really meant.

"A few more," he said. "Not a lot of us available, unfortunately."

Florin grunted. "If just over 50,000 former crawlers count as a few, then yeah, mate. It's just a few."

Holy shit. I swallowed, and I held out my hand to Tipid. The man stepped forward, and he pulled me into a hug.

I could barely move. I couldn't believe it. A wave of emotion swept over me, traveling up my legs, pausing at my chest, and moving its way to my head. I suppressed a sob.

"I don't know if it'll be enough, brother," Tipid whispered, grasping the back of my head and putting his forehead against my own. "But we're here. We've been watching, and we couldn't watch anymore. We're here."

"Very touchy-feely, these Crest," Donut said.

Rosetta approached as Tipid stepped aside, and I thought maybe she was going to hug me, too. She paused, looked up into the air and said, "This isn't an attack. This is a self-correcting measure given in the spirit of comradery. Okay?"

"What?" I asked.

She smacked me on the forehead with the flat of her palm. It wasn't a hard strike, but it was loud. And it hurt.

I was so shocked, I didn't react for several seconds. I just looked at her. Tipid grinned and shook his head.

“What did you do that for?” I finally asked.

She didn’t answer. Instead she pulled me into a hug and kissed me on both cheeks. “Comrade,” she whispered. “We are here.”

“You know, I’m here, too,” Donut said, tail swishing angrily. “It’s my army, too.”

Tipid patted Donut on the head. “Hello, Princess. It’s very nice to meet you as well.”

Donut appeared temporarily mollified.

Florin: Mate, do you know these people already? They’re acting pretty familiar.

I gave him a very slight *no* nod of my head. He dropped it immediately.

Rosetta was examining my ponytail, turning it over in her hands. She let go of it, letting it slump heavy on my shoulder. Then she reached forward and stuck her hand down the front of my shirt through the collar and put her hand against the Bedlam Bride tattoo. Her fingers were like ice.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“How much do you have left?”

“Of what?”

She pulled her hand free. “The toraline. Give it to me, and give me the ink the spider used to make that tattoo.”

Rosetta: Don’t say anything out loud. They’re still listening. Do you still have the credit chit you got from the dead pig?

The credit chit was a credit card-like device we’d looted off an orc hunter on the sixth floor.

Carl: Donut has it in her inventory.

Rosetta: Good. I’ll get it from her later. Now give me the items I asked for.

I pulled the sliver of the vegetable out from my inventory. All I had left was a finger-sized slice. The glass container containing the tattoo ink that Shi Maria had brewed was still hot to the touch, and I had to hold it by the top edge. There were only a few thimblefuls of liquid left.

I felt the eye blink on my chest, as if it had been awakened by her touch.

“Mordecai has more,” I said. “Of the toraline, I mean. But not much.”

She sighed. “Give me access to your saferoom, and we will get to work. Give me access to your bomber’s studio, too. And three million gold.” She glared at the sliver of vegetable. “Better make it four million.” She pointed

at Donut. “You. Don’t wander. We have to purchase some things from that bopca out there, and I need your charm to get the best price.”

I could feel that Donut was about to say something snarky to the woman when Rosetta added, “If that’s okay with you, warlord. You have the highest charm out of all of us.”

Donut appeared to weigh her response. She had an unreadable expression as she glanced back and forth between me and Rosetta. She turned to look at Tipid, as if she was contemplating something. She turned her attention back to me, her eyes focusing on my own, which were still wet with tears.

“I suppose that will be acceptable,” Donut finally said. She paused again, and then added with a much more cheerful voice, “I must say, Rosetta. I do like this version of you. You’re much more confident than you were on television. You were giving me Charlotte vibes when we met you last time, but now you’re a straight Samantha. Not sex doll head Samantha. Sex addict Samantha. But, you know, bald.”

“What?” Rosetta asked. “What does that even mean?”

“See? It’s great.”

I held out my hands. My head spun. “Wait a minute. Everybody just wait. What the hell is going on? There’s *fifty* thousand of you? How did you get here?”

Tipid grinned. “You might want to sit down for this, brother. We have a short story to tell. Then we gotta get to work.”

The “short” story took almost an hour for Tipid to relate, and even then, he only managed to tell us the basics.

He told us of his life after he’d left the dungeon. Of the surgery he’d had to get to keep himself alive, and the debt he’d incurred as a result of that surgery. He told us of Doctor Hu of the Crawler Project, an NFC organization dedicated to helping former crawlers navigate the universe after release.

Dr Hu. Dr *Porthus* Hu. Author of the second edition of the cookbook. The first crawler to receive the item.

“Is he here?” I asked, interrupting. “Did he come into the dungeon with you?”

“No,” Tipid said. “We all had to scatter when they accused us of being a terrorist organization. I don’t know where he is.”

“Wait,” Donut asked. “So, are you like fugitives? Are they going to swoop in and arrest everyone at any moment?”

Rosetta grinned. “Oh, I hope they try, warlord. But now that we’re in the game, there is nothing they can do. They’ll wait until we get out to try to arrest us.”

There was so much I wanted to ask. Tipid continued, all of us paying rapt attention.

Dr. Hu’s work had been instrumental in helping to create multiple laws that would protect crawlers upon release. Because of the Crawler Project’s campaigning, all released crawlers were now automatically citizens of the Syndicate and given access to the inner system primary zone, which came with free healthcare and guaranteed housing. When Tipid was released, he wasn’t afforded any of that.

Mistress Tiatha sat off to the side and grunted with derision as she listened to this. The half-elf manager of Elle was drunk as usual. “That citizenship perk is only for new crawlers,” she said, slurring the words. “And they’ll still bleed you dry on taxes. Us old guard are gonna get extra fucked when we’re released. They tell us we’ll be ‘full citizens,’ but I don’t believe it. The rich folk sure like getting their faces up on the screen when they’re donating to some charity, but the moment a scruffy, former crawler shows up in their home system looking to settle down, they’ll fight like hell to prevent it. Mark my words.” She took a long swig of her bottle. The woman’s eyes settled on Mongo, and they were wet. She rubbed them and wandered off.

Tipid continued. In addition to the Crawler Project, Dr. Hu formed the Open Intellect Pacifist Network, which was a smaller, more focused group whose purpose was to end the crawl all together. This organization did not have nearly as much support. I could tell there was so much more Tipid wanted to say, and I hoped I would get the chance to learn it all.

That whole incident with Paulie the residual in the body of a homeless man in the Florida shelter had been just one of several actions that had caused authorities to finally start to crack down on the non-profit.

After Tipid's life-saving surgery, he finally settled in a Crest colony, where he worked for a waste management company for a very, very long time. We didn't have time to get into the details, but it was Doctor Hu who had suggested the idea of refurbishing one of the garbage freighters into a passenger liner. He put out a call to former crawlers who wanted to get back into the game to help us with Faction Wars, and he'd been overwhelmed by the response.

They'd come to help fight their former captors. Even when I managed to get the protections turned off, they still came. I was, again, overwhelmed with emotion.

As Tipid told his story, Rosetta left and headed toward our saferoom. I warned Mordecai she was coming, and about five minutes after she arrived, a group of three more former crawlers—not cookbook authors—entered the saferoom and went out into the guild. All three were small, winged, lizard-like creatures called bune. All three waved at me and Donut before continuing on their way.

"You're all level 60," I said, watching the lizards scuttle off. Despite their wings, they loped about on the ground. "What level were you in the dungeon?"

"I was 96 when I left," Tipid said. "When we checked in, they gave all of us the standard merc package. Level 60. Able to choose a non-permanent race and class. Most don't go for the race change, but some did. My class during my first go-around was a poisoner. Now it's something called a Liquid Dervish." He grinned. "It's a good one."

"What about gear?" I asked, looking the man up and down. He was wearing the same thing Rosetta had been. The three bune had also been wearing just basic clothes.

"What you see is what you get," Tipid said. "But, some of us picked classes that come with weapons or powerful spells." He tapped his head. "Plus you get everything that's up here. We may be level 60, but each one of us is at least a tenner. We've all survived Faction Wars at least once. Or Land War. We have a couple of Battle Royale winners with us, too."

"Tell him about the mercs," Florin said.

Tipid nodded. "Unfortunately, we weren't the only ones added at the last minute. You just got a boost of 50,000 ready soldiers. The problem is, all eight of the other teams got a boost of their own. Each team has just about 20,000 new soldiers. All of them are experienced mercenaries, or in

some cases, the private guard of the warlords. They let them come in armed. That's in addition to their existing armies."

"What?" Donut asked. "Why do they get weapons and you didn't?"

"They negotiated a different agreement with the AI. They got to come in with their existing gear. They don't get to change race, and their class is Hired Mercenary. They get to keep their weapons and are given a few rudimentary spells, plus whatever they can pick up here in the dungeon. Trust me, it's a raw deal. Still, there's a lot of them. About 150,000 new bad guys to kill, spread evenly over the other teams."

"Damn it," I said. I met Florin's grim eyes. My joy at having these reinforcements was starting to get clouded by this new reality.

Tipid nodded. "If we get to face the factions one at a time, I'd say no problem, but since they're working together, we got a bumpy entry ahead of us, that's for certain. Especially for the first week." Tipid took a long breath. "Still, we're lucky they didn't let them choose a race and class. They'd be much stronger. I'll take my *Murder Tornado* spell over a pulse rifle any day." He gave me a wink. "And wait until you see what my friend Justice Light can do. That eagle knows more about traps than anyone else who ever set foot in the dungeon."

"Okay," I said standing up, trying not to let the emotion overwhelm me all over again. "Let's get to the base and meet up with the team."

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER IKICHA, 11TH EDITION>

If only I could see him again. It would change everything.

I am jealous, those of you with community, with friends, with family. My kind are castrated and cast out. As such, I think my perspective is unique, so much different than the one who came before me, York, who appears to have come from a hive, yet says he always felt alone his entire life. We are so different, but upon reading his words, I feel such kinship. I wonder, did he survive? Those of you reading this, if you are ever free of this place, I pray you seek out the others who came before. It is a dream. Can you imagine? Together, there would be nothing we couldn't do. Nothing.

Time until the ceasefire ends: 52 hours.

Entering The Princess Posse Base Camp.

This is your home territory.

Warning: There is a red alert incursion into your territory. Enter the Flag Room to see the details.

We stepped from the exit into chaos. It was me, Donut, Tipid, and Florin. Imani stayed behind to work in her magic room. Mistress Tiatha was showing her some battlefield enhancement spells with her newly-upgraded room, and Imani wanted to train with it some before returning.

Louis, Katia, and Bautista would soon be here with *Party Planner*.

The attached saferoom was a small, wooden bait shop with no proprietor. The room itself was barely big enough to fit us all. We stepped out from the small shop onto a grassy plain with a powerful, orange sun beating down on us from directly above. White and yellow flowers dotted the grass. I turned to see the small, wooden shack standing there. The “Bait Shop” sign hung over the door in English. Just past the shop was a small lake.

The skeleton of a new building was in the process of being erected around the shop. Up a small hill, a second, larger building stood. It was a stone structure, but I couldn’t see how big it was. This building was also being encased in metal girders. Multiple workers crawled over both structures. They were boxing the saferoom in, protecting it. It appeared they were expanding the size of the other structure up the hill, connecting the two.

A cool, soft breeze filled the air, though the aroma was that of construction. It was of smoke and ozone and burnt tar. It was a scent I associated with shipyards and welding. Hundreds of people of all shapes and forms stood about, walking, talking, working, and laughing. Far to my left where the ground started to slope away, a group was hard at work, building some type of palisade wall. A fireball flashed through the air and crashed into the metal posts, causing it to glow red. A group of men and women were talking animatedly, pointing at the impact. *They’re testing the walls as they build them.*

Multiple watch towers were already constructed, and each tower appeared to be manned by three or four people. I could see another tower being built some distance away in the middle of the plains.

Another group were using *Build Trench* scrolls and appeared to be making a channel up toward the small lake.

I had no idea where they were getting the materials for all this.

Mongo screeched with concern, and Donut patted him on the head as we took it all in. Rend stood on my shoulder, oohing and ahing as he

gnawed on an errant strand of my hair. He'd eaten one of my hair ties, and I hadn't realized it until my hair fell in front of my eyes.

"You only get a limited number of officers," Florin was saying as we walked. "We're recruiting most of the construction guys and crawlers as sergeants and chiefs which allows them to alter the camp, but there's probably a limit to that as well. Everyone else is going to get the rank of legionnaire with corporals leading individual teams for now."

"It says there's an incursion into the territory," I said.

"It's mobs," Tipid said. "Normally they should be cleared out by now, but they made the world bigger, and now we have some hunting to do. We need to decide who to send. There's only limited experience to be had right now."

"If we don't get them all," Florin added, "Then the warning system is useless."

A group of soldiers were struggling to push a wall section up. It fell, and they all jumped away. The giant section of wall reverberated with a loud crash, embedding into the earth so deep, it buried itself in a shower of dirt and grass and dust. Florin moved off to help them.

To my left, someone pointed at us and shouted. Everything stopped, just like that. Hundreds of pairs of eyes all turned in our direction.

A tall, muscular human sergeant stood right there, carrying what looked like a steel H-beam for a building. The metallic beam had to be 20 feet long, and it looked as if it weighed two tons. The monster of a man held it on his shoulder.

His name was Penn, and he was a **level 62 Fortification Engineer**.

In fact, I realized, several of the people around me had the same class. Fortification Engineer. Everyone who wasn't an engineer was level 60. The engineers seemed to be the only ones who'd risen in level.

The mountain of a man tossed the massive beam to the ground, turned, and wrapped his arms around me in a crushing hug.

I let out an *oof* as a swarm of bune dragon people came rushing up to surround Donut, walking and buzzing around her, all touching her and then going to the ground and bowing. Mongo looked back at Donut, who appeared equally bewildered.

The man put me down and kissed me on the cheek. He had tears in his eyes.

Donut: CARL, WHY IS EVERYONE KISSING YOU ALL OF A SUDDEN? THAT'S LIKE THE THIRD PERSON IN AN HOUR. YOU'RE GOING TO GET MONO.

"*Hup, hup, hup,*" Penn started to rhythmically shout, pumping his fist into the air.

I just looked at the man. I was about to ask, "What the hell are you doing?" when someone else started doing it as well. Soon, everyone was shouting and pumping their appendages into the air. It turned into a war chant of sorts. *Hup, hup, hup.* People were shouting in rhythm like we were at a concert or a football game.

More and more people approached, also shouting and pumping their arms into the air, and soon, we were surrounded. Thousands of people—humans, skyfowl, crocodilians, bune, yenk, and so many others pumped their fists or wings in the air, chanting. The sound was deafening.

But it was more, too. It was terrifying. The ground shook. I felt a deep well of pride at that sound, that chant. In less than three days, we'd all be waist deep in blood. A lot of us would be dead. But for now, this war cry filled me with hope and power.

Tipid tried saying something to me, but I couldn't hear him over the noise. He moved to chat.

Tipid: This is for you. This is what you built.

And just like that, they were done. Penn the human clapped me on the back, turned, and picked the massive beam back up, hoisting it over his shoulder and started walking toward the palisade construction. Everyone else also went back to work. I just stood there, watching them for a few moments, still overwhelmed.

Off to the side, I blinked as a giant alligator thing suddenly appeared next to Florin. The crawler said something to the giant creature, which was enormous, like 25 feet long. The creature's long snout moved into the dirt and easily urged the embedded wall section up into the air as the workers swarmed around it, heaving as they pushed the wall back into place.

The creature was too far away to fully examine, but I could see the symbol of a flag over it. This was Florin's card from the previous floor. A giant caiman. The card combat system was left behind on the 8th level, thank god, but we could still summon our chosen card once a day. Summoning time was equal to twice their regular countdown. If they died, they still came back the next day.

The giant alligator creature did a happy little hop, reminding me of Mongo.

“Come on, Carl,” Donut finally said. “We need to see this stronghold, and then I have to get back and help Rosetta.”

“Your changelings and those flesh golems started building the stronghold on top of the hill over here,” Tipid said as we walked through the camp. Each former crawler we passed grinned at me, waved, and then went back to work. “It’s a good location, but they didn’t understand how important saferooms are, so we have to expand the building and combine the two. We’re going to build the whole stronghold around the wood shack. This will allow your airships to dock directly from the fortress. Have you seen the new saferoom rules? That’s going to be a problem, so we gotta combine the two buildings. We had a few thousand of us choose that Fortification Engineer race so they could build fast. It lets them level with construction, too. We also have several alchemists who’ve been making the materials since we got here a few days ago, and we have a solid staff who can also enchant the walls. There’s a yenk named Langrim who used to run the enchantment guild here, and they really know what they’re doing. We hadn’t been able to start the actual construction until just now. It wouldn’t let us build until we were officially converted. We have crews here, on both borders, and others building fall-back positions throughout along with multiple watchtower squads.”

“Wait, what are the new saferoom rules?” I asked, my head spinning. There was a lot that had changed, I knew, but I hadn’t had time to go over it all yet.

“Lots of small changes and a couple big ones. Once the fighting starts, it’s going back to the blood bar system, so you can’t just hide in the saferoom for the whole floor. This is for everybody. You kill someone or something, you fill your blood bar up. Up to nine or ten hours I think. The bar lowers when you’re inside, so you can’t just camp and hide out. That’s a good and a bad thing. Second rule is no mercenaries inside guildhalls during the last two phases, except for a small staff of up to nine people at a

time. That ain't too big of a deal, but it means we have to build sleeping quarters for all these folks, and we won't be able to keep a reserve."

I thought of Mordecai and the changeling children he was fostering.

"Are you considered a mercenary?" I asked. "And do you get the achievements or quests or anything?"

"We're mercenaries all right. That orc adjutant of yours can probably clarify it better, but most of us ain't getting into your guildhall once fighting starts. This was a big sticking point with some of the other teams because the active crawlers can still use their regular saferooms. To a point, that is, with the blood bar active. As for achievements and all that weird stuff, no, thank the gods. We don't get that. Just level notifications and messages."

This Tipid guy was, what? Several thousand years old? Even though he appeared older than Rosetta, he still didn't seem *that* old. Nor did he act it. He had a big, sideways grin on his scarred face the whole time he moved on through the camp. In some ways, he reminded me of my friend, Sam. Goofy, but not dumb. Disheveled, but always alert. Someone who would surprise you at the strangest moments. Tipid didn't have the most entries in the cookbook, but the ones he did have were filled with haunting guilt and anger. He'd had a tragedy near the end of his crawl that had really messed him up, and this version of him was so different, it was jarring. Still, it was there once you knew to look for it. The tension. The anger. I could sense hints of it under the surface, like scars not quite hidden by a newly painted wall.

"What about the other teams?" I asked.

"Pretty much all the non-NPC officers have saferooms of their own. They'll have built their strongholds around one. Big exception is the Lemig team, but we can talk about that later. This change will hurt the Operatics and the naga the most, both of whom are known for hiding rather than fighting."

Florin came jogging back up to join us. He was grumbling something about artillery. His giant caiman had already timed out and poofed away.

"We need to talk about the naga team," I said. "They need to be our first target."

"Figured you say that," Tipid said. "That's going to be a problem with the enemy massing on the opposite border. Let's get to the flag room and talk strategy."

Mongo started making a strange, chirping noise.

“Mongo, what’re you doing?” Donut asked. “What is it?” Mongo was sniffing up at the air.

We came to a large, metallic door that looked as if it’d been hammered into shape by a blind and drunk metalsmith. The damn thing was huge, like 20 feet high. This was the part of the stronghold that had been built by the changelings and flesh golems. The door was propped open with a rock, but not open wide enough to squeeze through. Tipid reached over and grabbed a ring and started to pull. He grunted with the effort, and I moved to help.

To my surprise, an info box popped up the moment I touched the door.

Oversized, Cumbersome Door. Apprentice Quality. This fortification is at 80% Strength.

You don’t want to be behind this thing once it’s kicked in.

3/3 Enchantments active. Increase quality to increase enchantment capacity.

Current Enchantments:

Battering Resistance.

Force Reflection.

Heat Absorption.

The moment I added my strength, the door started to slowly, slowly ease open, squealing in protest. A rock fell from the door frame as we pulled. Rend, still on my shoulder, started making grunting noises even though he wasn’t doing anything.

“My goodness,” Donut said. “It certainly is a big door, but it’s not the most enduring construction, is it? Mongo, stop doing that!” Donut jumped to my shoulder. Rend, still on my opposite shoulder, dropped my strand of hair and began gnawing on Donut’s tail. Donut didn’t notice. “Carl, why is Mongo making weird noises?”

Tipid grunted as we continued to pull. “Once we get this open, we have to close it right away because...”

The door flew all the way open, and both Tipid and I went flying back. I hit the ground with an *oof* and slid. Rend went flying and rolled down the hill, giggling the whole time while Donut shrieked.

“She’s out again!” someone cried.

I looked up in time to see the giant allosaurus with a pink tutu rush out into the clearing in front of the building. She hopped up and down in front of Mongo, waving her little wand, who also started to hop up and down in front of her.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered.
Tina.

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“POP.. PA-PA!” TINA GRUNTED AT MONGO.

Mongo screeched, waving his arms up at the giant dinosaur as they both continued to hop up and down, dancing in circles. I held my breath. These two didn’t have the best relationship, but that was before Tina had “woken up” during the Butcher’s Masquerade.

It appeared they were getting along now. We all stumbled as the giant dinosaur continued to bounce. More rocks fell from the building. “Pa-pa! Pa-pa!”

When Tina talked, it was with deep, guttural growls, and it was difficult to understand what she was saying. I could feel the bass of her voice in my chest. I had to remind myself this was a little kid.

“Papa?” Donut asked, scoffing. She returned to my shoulder, shaking with rage. “Mongo is most certainly not your father! And when did you start to talk?”

“Tina, get back inside!” a new voice cried.

We all turned to watch as a female ursine waddled out the front door. The bear woman wore an eyepatch. Old, deep scarring covered her head. She held a spoon in her hand and had an apron stretched taut around her enormous, pregnant belly.

Kiwi.

I exchanged a look with Florin.

Kiwi was born as an Ursine, but she was a female Mongo when we'd met her. She'd been turned into a dinosaur during Scolopendra's nine-tier attack. She'd been changed back to a bear during the Butcher's Masquerade. It was how we won the Tina quest. But before she'd turned, she'd had... *relations* with Mongo when they were both dinosaurs.

And now she was pregnant. *Very* pregnant. About-to-pop pregnant.

Kiwi paused at the sight of her daughter dancing around Mongo, who'd now stopped and was staring at the bear.

"Mongo?" Kiwi asked.

Mongo gave a single, quiet roar. He pushed past Tina and moved, head low to the ground as everybody watched, all of us holding our breath, all of us wondering what was going to happen next. Mongo sniffed at Kiwi and gave an uncertain peep.

The entire camp had gone silent. I felt something on my foot. It was Rend. He wanted to be picked up. I reached down to grab him, not taking my eyes off the dinosaur and bear. Rend started chewing on Donut's tail again.

Donut sniffed angrily. "Carl, if this turns into some weird, furry porn thing, I'm going to lose my absolute shit."

Kiwi stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Mongo's neck, and she hugged him. Mongo just stood there. They hugged for a few moments, and then Kiwi turned away.

"Come, Tina," Kiwi said, voice softer this time. "Come help mommy make dinner." Kiwi looked at me and Donut, just standing there. She nodded, turned back inside, and she disappeared.

"Pa-pa," Tina said again before turning back inside.

Mongo remained, a confused look upon the dinosaur's face, like he didn't know what had just happened. He sniffed again at the air and let out a sad, confused peep.

"Sorry, buddy," I said to the poor dinosaur. "Sometimes people change, and that's all there is to it."

Mongo made a forlorn squeak.

"Papa," Donut muttered again.

"So," Florin muttered, "how do you reckon *that* litter is gonna turn out?"

**Entering the Fortress of Unyielding Power and Authority.
This Edifice is at 80% Strength.**

“Oh, shit,” I muttered the second I saw the name.

“What kind of name is that?” Donut announced. “That is a terrible name.” She paused. “Hey, it doesn’t let me change it!”

“Uh, yeah,” Florin said. “Apparently there was a bit of a tug-o-war over the name. The Sledge named it Los Santos for some reason, and the changelings preferred a name that would show power. They kept changing it back and forth until the AI told them to shove it. So it’s now stuck on that. The Sledge is pretty salty about it.”

“But the name is too long,” Donut complained. “This is most inconvenient.”

“‘Fortress of Unyielding Power and Authority?’” I laughed. “F U P A. The FUPA. That’s why the AI made it stay on that name.”

“I am absolutely not calling our castle the FUPA, Carl. That’s obscene! The bad guys are gonna laugh at us!”

“And what were you going to change it to?”

“I don’t know, Carl. Now I’m angry, and I can’t properly create when I’m angry. I was probably going to pick Club Posse or something.”

Florin chuckled.

“Don’t you be spreading that name,” Donut said. “How does this warlord thing work? How do I make sure people do what I say? That’s a direct order!”

I laughed again. I could see it was already too late. Florin had already put it up in the chat, and in seconds there were dozens of animated responses. Elle said it was hilarious, and Imani was with Donut, campaigning against it. Tran suggested calling it the “Foop” instead. I could tell it was going to become a thing, with half the people calling it one name and the other half calling it the other.

The stronghold itself was strangely empty of people and workers. A few dots were scattered about, but not many. It was built like a medieval castle with long hallways dotted with murder holes along the sides, all leading to the central chamber, the throne room, which had to be a specific size. The room could have a locking door, and the entrance to it could be trapped, but the room itself wasn’t allowed to have any defensive features or traps within. Though it could be occupied by guards.

The walls of the castle were hastily built and mortared. They felt solid, despite the shoddy appearance of the exterior door. Most of the interior hallways were regular-sized, but the outer ring was three stories tall, built to house Tina and some of the larger tattoo-turned-flesh golems. The rocks glowed with enchantment. I put my hand upon the rough rock, and an info box popped up.

Yeah, this is a rock. It's part of an interior rock wall. What did you think it was?

8/12 Enchantments active. Increase base quality to increase enchantment capacity.

Enter the Flag room to see the full list of active enchantments.

"FUPA," Donut muttered as we walked. "*Maybe* I'll call it the Foop, but even that sounds offensive."

"Welcome back, warlords," a new voice said. We stepped to the side as two NPCs rushed by, hauling what looked like bags of mortar. They were in the body of bugbears, but I knew they were some of my changelings. They rushed by without another word. Both were covered in sweat, working hard.

There was another dot ahead. This was an Elite. He had the pink glow around his name, indicating him as a soldier. He was in the next room over, an antechamber that led to the flag room. I hovered over the dot, and the system labeled him:

Elite Herman the Fleet. Ogre Strongman. Level 70.

Legionnaire.

Princess Posse.

Herman was the third of the three ogre strongmen from Grimaldi's circus. We'd met his brother, Areson during the sixth floor, and he should still be around here somewhere. Apollon, their other brother, had been left behind on the third floor. All three had once been part of a three-headed ogre called a nodling who'd died and split long ago. That same creature, the nodling, had been turned into a tattoo, who'd since been given flesh and should also be around here, too, which was really weird. That strangeness—basically two of the same creature—reminded me of the Alpha Carl card from the previous floor. That had to be confusing for everybody involved. It certainly messed with your head. I was glad we'd left the Alpha Carl card on the previous floor.

The elite was the only other dot I could see. I knew the adjutant was waiting in the flag room, but apparently we couldn't see inside.

“Where are the rest of the golems and changelings?” I asked.

“They’re all working on defenses at the borders,” Tipid said.

I paused, looking into the room that would be the throne room. It was just a square, empty room, about twenty by twenty feet, reminding me of a stairwell chamber. There was no actual throne. Not yet. I looked at the white, clean stones. I swallowed.

I continued to stand there and pretend like I was examining the room.

Carl: Okay, what about the stuff we can’t talk about out loud? Tell me about the scouting system.

This was something I’d specifically asked Florin and Elle to figure out, and we’d agreed ahead of time all of these discussions would be over chat in case the walls still had ears.

Florin: Elle is off toward the naga side. The beaver guys... the castors or whatever they’re called. They’re with that talking turtle guy, scouting enemy positions and fortifications on the other border. Haven’t heard back either way.

Carl: Have you figured out how the peacetime incursions work?

Florin: Yes. Only those with the Scout endorsement can go over the borders without a pass. If they get discovered, they’re immediately teleported back to base during the ceasefire and can’t go stealth again until the fighting starts. If they hit a trap, it’ll still go off and kill ‘em. We only get 18 Scouts. That’s what those towers are for, by the way. We need full coverage. Build a tower and man it with a group of four or five folks with proper observation and *Ping* spells, and we can keep the enemy scouts away. Already teleported out a Dream scout and one of those octopus-faced fucks from the Prism.

Donut let out an angry, little hiss at the mention of the Prism kingdom. She was still mad at Empress D’Nadia for trying to get us deleted.

Florin: I’ll bet my left sack we are already infested with enemy spies. That’s why we gotta get them towers up. We need to do a full sweep, and do it fast.

Carl: We need to start spamming traps, too.

Florin: Already on it, but the big trap guy—he’s an eagle guy with one wing—has gone subterranean already. He should come up for air in a few hours. He wants access to your trap table. Says he can prevent *Tripper* spells.

We moved to the antechamber in front of the flag room. This was just a big room with an even bigger desk, filled with the stench of rocks and moss. And a strange amount of sweat, too, oddly reminding me of the Juicer boss room on the first floor. Behind the desk, leaned over a pile of papers was the ogre. Herman the Fleet. The ogre was completely decked out in magical gear, glowing more than anyone I'd ever seen.

The ogre looked very much like his brother, Areson the Wise, except much thinner, like he'd stopped his weight training, giving him half the bulk of his two brothers. He also wore glasses, which was just bizarre. I wondered if that was the dungeon's way of telling me he wouldn't be as stupid as his brothers.

Upon further observation, I realized the ogre wasn't working like I originally thought. He appeared to be writhing in pain. All of us stopped, surprised at the unexpected display. He had both hands on the edge of the desk, and veins bulged from his arms. A low, pained grunting noise came from the Elite. Despite not being as buff as his brothers, the desk snapped in half, spilling papers in a great, surprising clatter. The ogre lifted his head into the air and cried out.

"What's happening?" Donut asked. "What's going on?"

"Carl," the ogre said through gritted teeth. He jumped up, and the chair went flying. "Been waiting. Brother says you good." He swallowed hard. "Supposed to do it already. Been fighting it. Tell brother... tell sorry." He cried again.

Dozens of little info boxes all popped up around the ogre all at once.

...And that was when I realized he wasn't wearing magical gear at all.

He was covered in explosive satchels, all hidden underneath his clothes.

A suicide bomber.

Watch out, Carl. Watch out.

Multiple things happened at once.

"Bomb!" I cried as Donut fired a *Magic Missile* right at the ogre's face.

To my left, Tipid turned into a puff of smoke, and to my right, Florin hit the ground, a shield forming around him.

At the same moment, the door to the flag room opened, an armored orc stepped out, and she slammed a massive, cruel-looking battle-axe into the head of the struggling ogre.

The elite slumped over, dead.

The chaos ended as quickly as it had started.

The orc had been so casual about it, you'd think she'd just stepped out to grab a cup of coffee.

We just stared at each other. Me and the orc.

"I can only do so much for you, warlord," the orc said.

All of the explosive satchels on the ogre started to move into destabilization.

"Shit," I muttered, jumping forward. I took the entire ogre into my inventory, my heart thrashing. It left nothing but a smear of gore and an upturned, broken desk on the floor.

The orc continued to stare back down at me with a slight hint of distaste on her boar-like face.

Baroness Victory.

Adjutant for The Princess Posse.

This is a "non-combatant" observer.

My eyes focused on the "non-combatant" part of her name, which now had quotes around it. The AI had done that.

"Not that I'm complaining, but..." I finally said, my voice shaking. Holy shit, that had been close. Florin stood back up and Tipid reformed. All of us were rattled. "Were you allowed to do that?"

"That wasn't a legal attack," the orc said, sliding her blood-splattered axe back into her waistband. A bit of brain dripped off it and splatted onto her boot. "That was an unlawful assassination attempt by Sensation Entertainment, and I will be calling foul. I will be filing a grievance against the Dream, who now own the entertainment company. They were exerting undue influence on one of their elites to affect Faction Wars. Princess Donut, that was an admirable shot, and it may have saved you all. I will file for you to get credit for the kill."

The orc paused, looking up at the ceiling. "No," she suddenly said out loud, angrily pointing at the ceiling. "Absolutely not. That was clearly a foul by the corporate interests who purchased Sensation, and if you don't like it, you should re-read your own rules. In addition, you are out of line by not warning me he was being influenced."

She paused again.

"I accept your apology," she finally said. And without another word, she turned and returned to the flag room, leaving the door open for us to follow.

"Uh, Carl," Donut asked. "Was she talking to the AI just now?"

“I don’t know if I should be terrified or in love,” Florin added as we walked into the flag room.

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THE FOUR PHASES OF COMBAT, PLUS TRIGGERING CONDITIONS:

Current Phase. The Ceasefire. 50 hours left.

The Ramp-Up. Triggers when the Ceasefire ends. 180 Hours.

Open Hostilities. Triggers when the Ramp-Up Expires.

The Peeling of Larracos. Triggers Once four teams remain.

We stepped into the large, round chamber. My interface beeped, and multiple windows suddenly popped up without bidding. Next to me, Donut squawked with annoyance as we both had to start repositioning windows.

Entering the FUPA Flag Room for the Princess Posse.

“Hey!” Donut said. “Carl, now the computer is calling it the FUPA!”

“You may speak freely in here,” Victory said once the door shut. “Before the hostilities begin, anything that is said in this room isn’t available to the viewers for eight days. So in case anyone is feeding the other factions information, it will hopefully be stale information by that time.”

I was too distracted by my screens to pay attention. I flicked an info box to the side, rearranging it. It was like the status window of a city building game, like *Civilization*, but not nearly as well organized. These screens

were different than the regular ones, and when I tried to mentally minimize them using the regular interface, all I did was move them around.

“This is not very consistent,” Donut muttered.

I grunted with agreement. I had multiple views in my interface. I mentally flicked on one a little hard, and it disappeared from my view and appeared floating on the wall of the room.

“Huh,” I muttered as I continued to move things around so I could actually see. I had a window that listed all the troops. One that listed all of our secured locations. One that listed the nine other teams, along with a message window where I could send direct messages to the other warlords. I saw the little three dots indicating someone was in the middle of typing a message in the Prism chat, and I realized it was coming from our side.

“Donut,” I said out loud. “Don’t.”

“Empress D’nadia needs to know how I feel about her betrayal, Carl.”

“She knows. Don’t poke at anyone yet.”

Donut harrumphed, but she didn’t send the message.

“Your display system is similar to what Game Guides see,” Victory said. “It’s only in this room. You’ll get used to it.”

I continued to move windows aside, and in doing so, I found each one of those info boxes could be drilled down further. I made the mistake of double clicking on the officer interface, and literally a hundred new windows popped up. I finally found a **Clear Screen** button, and I clicked it.

“Goddamnit,” I muttered.

Everything had disappeared, like my entire interface had turned off, including my health, the level timer, the mini map, and my mana bar. It was like I was in a production trailer. I was so used to the little info windows now, I felt naked without them. I grumbled and tried to figure out how to get them back without also pulling up the room notifications. I found the solution after a moment, but when I turned it all back on, my missed game notifications popped up.

I usually went over these when I could, but I had set it up that only important warnings and messages appeared. Everything else could wait until I made it to a saferoom, and even then, only when I thought to look at it. Most of this stuff was useless, and everyone had started calling this list the Spam Folder. These were world chat messages not directed at us, hidden skill notifications, and dozens of other pointless game announcements.

I blinked at the long, long line of strange notifications. I read the most recent ones, from just a few moments earlier. A sense of horror overwhelmed me.

***Gloom Wraith Phase* failed to activate. Mind Balance prevented activation.**

Your attempt to disable Mind Balance was prevented by Mind Balance.

Your Mind Balance has risen to level nine.

Level nine? It'd been level five just a few hours ago. I moved my eyes down the suppressed notifications page. My heart thrashed.

There were hundreds of these entries, over and over again. There were pages of me attempting to cast something, and each time, it got stopped. The *Mind Balance* skill came from my new toe ring, though now it was trained up so much, I'd still have the skill, minus five levels, even if I took the ring off. I didn't dare.

Shi Maria. The tattoo on my chest. She was trying to cast spells and activate skills without my permission. The *Gloom Wraith Phase* would've killed the ogre, but it also likely would've set off the bombs. Would I have been protected if they'd exploded while I was phased?

Only if the bombs were non-magical. I quickly glanced at the ogre corpse in my inventory. The bombs indeed were non-magical. Donut would've been dead had I cast that skill. She had her *Cockroach* ability, but that wouldn't help if she was blown to literal bits. A new wave of horror washed over me, and I found my shaking hand stroking the back of the oblivious cat. *Holy shit.*

Watch out, Carl. Watch out.

The spider had managed to speak in my mind, despite the *Mind Balance* skill. She was getting stronger with each attempt to control me. But so was I. It was a race, I realized. She was constantly fighting against the *Mind Balance* skill. And even though the skill was rapidly increasing in power, she'd still managed to break in for just a moment.

She was winning the race. How soon before she could take me over completely?

I sent a quick message to Mordecai, telling him we needed to talk.

Mordecai: If it's about that presence you have tattooed on your chest, Rosetta has caught me up. We're working on a solution. We have a few options on how to deal with it. None of them pleasant.

“Goodness, Carl, are you okay?” Donut asked. “You’re shaking like Miss Beatrice during pumpkin spice season.”

I patted Donut to reassure her. Baroness Victory was talking to us, but I’d missed some of it. She was explaining how to pull up a map in the center of the room, showing an overall view of the battlefield. I took a breath and forced myself to pay attention. One problem at a time.

“Most warlords spend all of Faction Wars in their flag room,” she was saying, “with some notable exceptions. The Orcs, the Reavers, and the Dream all have warlords who prefer to lead from the front. I am supposed to follow you onto the field for major conflicts, and as such, I have the limited ability to teleport, even during Ramp-Up, though I warn you, I cannot participate. What you saw just now was an anomaly.”

“You’re going to be with us whenever we fight?” I asked.

“I know you two prefer a more hands-on approach. I will be present when it’s prudent. If my presence causes a problem, let me know, and I will come back here. All adjutants can also go invisible if need be. But I will warn you. I can and will call out all fouls as I see them. That includes anything perpetrated by your team. If you have any questions about the rules, ask me first. I am on your side. I can help with strategy. In addition, I can make suggestions to fit something into the existing ruleset, if required.”

“Was she nice, or was she a jerk?” Donut asked.

Baroness Victory just looked at Donut. “Of whom do you speak?” she finally asked.

“Your sister. The orc queen lady. The one that got blown up when your nephew tried to assassinate us.”

If the orc woman was surprised by the odd question, she didn’t show it. But she did appear to think about her answer. “My sister Ugloo and I once had a very similar outlook on life. When she married into the royal family, she lost a lot of who she was. I suppose she was quite unhappy with how things had turned out for her. We had not spoken in a long while, but she did send me a message before she died, asking if I was planning on being an adjutant this season. She was going to the Scolopendra Club to meet up with the king and wanted to have an outing before the fighting started. Why do you wish to know, Princess?”

“You can judge someone based on how they talk about the dead.”

Carl: What TV show did you get that from?

Donut: I DIDN'T GET IT FROM A SHOW, CARL. I REALLY WANT TO KNOW. YOU PICKED HER TO BE OUR ADJUTANT PERSON, AND I NEED TO KNOW IF WE CAN TRUST HER.

Carl: We don't trust anybody, Donut. Not at first. But something tells me she's okay.

Donut: YOU ALSO TRUSTED SISTER INES, AND LOOK HOW THAT TURNED OUT.

Mongo had eased his way behind the orc, and he was greedily licking at the head of the bloody axe in her waistband. Rend climbed to the top of Mongo's head and also attempted to lick at the axe, but he couldn't reach and he was making whimpering, grunting noises. The stoic orc pulled the axe from her waistband and leaned it up against the table so they could both get at it. She gave Rend a gentle pat. Even Florin looked a bit ill at the display.

The orc turned back to the map and kept talking. The wagon wheel shape of the ninth floor spread out in the center of the room in a giant, round hologram. Larracos stood in the middle with the nine, not-quite-but-almost equal pie shapes of the individual spaces spread out from the center. A tiny ring circled Larracos, and it blinked and turned pink as we watched. The name **Shanty Town. Controlled by the Princess Posse** popped up.

The large orc nodded. "This was a smart trade. The shanty town is usually small and unimportant and doesn't usually form until after the fighting begins and the NPCs flee. It is now quite large and completely circles Larracos, giving the NPCs an extra layer of security. One you control."

"We have three town upgrade coupons," I said. "Donut and I each got one when we completed the Tina quest on the sixth floor. And I just got a tier three upgrade in a box. Can we use them for this?"

"Absolutely," Victory said. "And with the new city defense system the AI created, you may be able to get something similar to what they have in Larracos. But you may also use the coupons for your base here, and that may be a better choice."

Britney was currently learning all she could about the Larracos city defense system from Juice Box. I sent her a message to check in when she was done. I also sent a message to Li Na. We'd finally managed to get her officially recruited thanks to Mordecai brewing a potion that negated aura effects. The moment she'd joined, she asked if she and her squad could be

in charge of helping to build defenses in and around Shanty Town. I'd agreed.

We moved our attention to the nine pie pieces. Our area was highlighted in pink. The whole area outside the city was called the Plains of Larracos, and it was mostly flat, except for the northernmost area of the map. The first pie piece in spot number one was owned by the Bone Clan of the Skull Empire, and their castle was called "The King's Point." It was the only of nine pie pieces that came with a pre-built castle, and it sat in a highly defensible position atop a small, rocky mountain that occasionally had lava flow around it.

The orcs' territory also had the most rivers and lakes, including the large, fast-moving river that eventually drained into Larracos itself, though the end of it curved into Operatic territory in spot number two before it passed through Shanty Town and plunged into the funnel city.

The rocky peaks made way to rolling hills, which was the area of the Operatics in pie number two. We were in spot number three. Our area was mostly flat with a few hills here and there. The small lake near our base appeared to be the only major water supply in the entire area.

"The main body of the enemy is massing on your border here," Victory said, pointing to the spot on our northern border with the Operatics. Dozens of little campfire icons appeared. "Initial estimates appear they are about 100,000 strong. The system allowed them to keep their armor and weapons. It's a calculated effort. Their best chance is to sweep over our position and take us out immediately."

I blinked up at her. A wave of new fear washed over me.

"What? That many?"

She ignored me and moved her pointer behind the camp. "We also have intelligence that the Dream are setting up their long-range artillery batteries here." She moved her pointer to the other side of the map into spot number four, the Naga side. "And here. There's another 10,000 on this side of the border, more as a defensive action, I suspect. It could be a trick, but they believe they have the numbers and plan on overrunning your position the moment the ceasefire ends, forcing you to retreat into the city. Or die defending this castle. Have you familiarized yourself with the ramp-up?"

"Uh, the what?" I asked.

"This season's rules regarding the onset of hostilities. There are four phases, and we are in phase one right now. The Ceasefire. Then there's the

Ramp-Up, Open Hostilities, and the Peeling of Larracos. When the Ceasefire ends, the Ramp-Up begins. It lasts 180 hours. There are several rules for this next phase, and you must familiarize yourself with them immediately. The important ones are: No celestial summonings will be allowed. Egress into enemy territory by non-scouts is only allowed through narrow, kilometer-wide ‘gates.’ Each corridor is at the same spot, and it is where the enemies are massing. And most importantly, offensive magic and teleport magic or skills will not be allowed during this second phase.”

“What? No magic?” Donut asked. “But I just upgraded my *Wall of Fire!*”

“*Wall of Fire* will have to wait. But it’s just offensive magic. Magic designed to cause direct harm to another. And magic or skills designed to transport you from one space to another. There’ll be a suppression field over the entire floor that will disallow it. You can use such spells now, but the ability goes away the moment phase two starts.”

“So, Donut’s *Puddle Jumper* and my *Gloom Wraith Phase* won’t work?” I asked. “And what about the Gate of the Feral Gods? Or magical weapons?”

“Weapons will work, but not separate spells attached to them. The wraith phase is an offensive skill, not a spell, and it will work. It’s a phase, not a teleport. *Puddle Jumper* will not work. The Gate of the Feral Gods will not activate. You both have multiple spells that will work, such as *Torch* and *Hole* and *Wisp Armor*, but unfortunately, many more that will not.”

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “We can only enter into each other’s territory through a kilometer-wide gap, and we can’t use the best magic or teleport during this time? What about traps?”

“Traps will still work as long as they’re not teleport or summon traps. They have to be static. You can’t repurpose them as weapons or artillery ammunition. And the rest is correct. It is designed to force bloody, hand-to-hand combat. And non-magical artillery. During this time, you will be at a severe disadvantage. The other eight teams will have the numbers and their vastly superior weapons that they brought with them from outside the dungeon. If you can survive this first week, then you *might* survive long enough to start moving offensively. Your only saving grace is that during this time, you only have two entry points into your land. You have to guard them both because once they’re in, they’re in and can move freely. The

Ramp-Up will end after 180 hours, which is a little more than a week of your time. When the Open Hostilities phase starts, the chaos truly begins. They will wish to defeat you before that phase even starts.”

“Hmm,” Donut said, looking over the map. “What about our new town? Can they attack that place during the ramp-up?”

“Yes. But if they capture it, they still won’t be able to get into your territory. Or into Larracos. They *will* attack it if it’s left undefended. I suggest treating with the NPCs to help defend the town. The bulk of the enemy forces will be concentrated on you, and they won’t want to commit a lot of resources taking the ring, as they will get it automatically should you fall. It’s a tactically important prize, but not during ramp-up. It’s a dangerous waste of troops to push in at this point. Especially if you have active defenses.”

Baroness Victory crossed her meaty arms. “Also, I should add, the bulk of the enemy’s forces are mercenaries. The AI changed the 15K rule to allow the outsiders into the game. That means most everyone you’re facing is someone who wasn’t born in the dungeon, and they won’t be so keen to wade into a real battle with real consequences. These ‘warlords’ are called that in name only. Very few of the officers are warriors with real battle experience. Most of these mercenaries have only seen limited conflicts against armed opponents. They’re mostly security forces. Not all, but most of them. My guess is they’ll be shy to commit troops to actions with a high probability of casualties. They’ll be looking for a single punch knock-out. That’s what they know. Not complicated. Not tricky. Just overwhelming numbers with pulse rifles and power armor facing down opponents who won’t be able to shoot back very effectively for over a week. They’ll want it done fast and easy.”

“Shit,” I said, looking at the dozens of little campfires sitting on our border. One hundred thousand was *a lot* of enemies. I’d once gone to a concert with 20,000 people, and I couldn’t get over how many people that was all at one place at one time. This was five times that. It was an insane amount of enemies.

“We’re building defenses,” Florin said, indicating a line on the side of the border. “We’ve created a no-man’s land that we will soon litter with *Trippler*-proof traps. And we’re building trenches. We have engineers who’ve been watching and studying this type of warfare for a very long time, and we’ll do our damndest to hold them back. But if they break

through, we'll have multiple fall-back positions. Though once they're through, they'll be able to flank us until we get to the FUPA."

We all stood in silence, looking at the map. A hundred thousand troops on one side, ready to pour over us like ants. Earlier, Tipid said it'd been a mistake for them to arm themselves with their existing gear and not take classes and spells. I wasn't so sure about that anymore.

A small group of people entered the flag room. It was Louis, Katia, Bautista, Samantha, and a few others.

Samantha sat on Louis's shoulder, bawling her eyes out. A trail of snot ran down her face, and she kept using Louis's neck to wipe. "You can't do that to a girl," she was saying. "It's not right. I wouldn't have disrupted the wedding."

A little gnomish girl stood by Katia's legs. She wore a Dallas Cowboy's jersey like a dress. "You said you would push her over and take her place at the last second."

Bonnie. The little gnome girl whom we'd "rescued" from the floating gnome fortress on the fifth floor. The one who'd made the lemonade during the boss fight with the goose. She'd come here with the changelings after the Butcher's Masquerade. Donut gasped and jumped from my shoulder to head bump the kid.

"You are a child," Samantha said to Bonnie. "You don't understand the intricacies of modern love. And even if I was going to do that, or maybe slit the bitch's throat, that's no reason to get married without letting me know." She wiped more snot on Louis's neck.

"Don't worry," Donut said. "That was just the first wedding. There's a bigger ceremony in a few weeks."

Louis and Katia both shot Donut a why-did-you-tell-her-that? look.

"Wait, really?" Samantha asked as the rest of us groaned. "There's *another* ceremony? Why didn't you say so! This changes everything."

"Hey kiddo," I said to Bonnie, ignoring the exchange. I went to a knee. "Did you fly here on Louis's new airship?"

"Hi Carl. Hi Donut," Bonnie said. "I like it. It's faster than the *Twister*. Skarn and a few others are playing with it right now in the hangar. Louis hired a bunch of gremlins to work on it, and we bought an upgrade for door guns."

I patted the tiny gnome on the head. "You shouldn't have to think about that sort of stuff. We just need you to stay safe."

The little girl gave me a chilling smile. “I shouldn’t have to think about killing outworlders? Why shouldn’t I? Have they stopped thinking about trying to kill me?”

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TIME UNTIL THE CEASEFIRE ENDS: 33 HOURS.

“I never thought I’d see one of these again,” I muttered as we hunched over in the woods. A loud, whining noise reverberated through the forest. A group of trees and vines crunched and cracked as they were pushed down and shattered by the distant, rolling ball of wailing mobs. The sound was like that of a screaming bulldozer bullying its way through the forest.

“It’s different,” Chris said. “It’s slower. It’s still fast, but it’s slower.”

“A lot slower,” Donut agreed. “And it smells worse, if such a thing is possible.”

I looked down toward Chris’s voice. I couldn’t actually see the lava rock crawler, who’d blended himself with the ground and was directly below our feet. I felt strange about standing directly atop him, but he insisted it didn’t bother him.

A group of distant birds launched into the sky as the ball rolled by, shrieking their displeasure. Donut was right about the smell. It was an awful, if not familiar, stench.

It was me, Donut, Chris, Jamal the hammerhead shark, and three of the newcomers. The newcomers were two former crawlers and a veteran of Land War, which was a different game entirely that had been inflicted on his home planet. Everyone still called them crawlers. The Land War guy’s name was Bodi, and he was a tall, tan-skinned human. He was a **Level 60**

Big Game Spear Hunter. He'd said maybe three words since I'd met him, making Chris seem downright chatty.

Bodi was one of the former crawlers elected to be a battalion commander based on his experience in and out of the dungeon.

He did, indeed, carry a spear. Something from the pile. A long, efficient looking metal stick with a no-nonsense point at the end. It had both a piercing and a boomerang enhancement, meaning it'd fly back to the tall warrior's hand once tossed. I didn't know anything about him or his history, but based on the way the others looked at him, I knew this guy was someone famous.

The other two crawlers were both male "elves," but they were a type of elf I'd never seen. Both had white, pigment-free skin and sharp teeth, giving them a nightmarish appearance, more goblin than anything. Like they were Dream elves who'd evolved underground.

They'd exited the dungeon as tenners—those who tapped out at the start of the tenth floor—a season or two before Rosetta's. They otherwise acted fairly human-like. I was starting to come to the uncomfortable realization this was pretty normal for the people of the Syndicate. That the general citizenry of the galaxy as a whole were all similar to us in so many ways, despite their vastly different anatomies and cultures and environments. I didn't know what that meant, but the knowledge made me feel strangely unsettled. It was the same feeling I had during the Iron Tangle when I just knew I was missing something, something important.

Anyway, the names of the two elves were Griffin and Morales. Neither looked older than 20 years old, and unlike Chris or Bodi, these two wouldn't shut the hell up. Griffin was a **Level 60 Eviscerator** and Morales was a **Level 60 Plumbing Specialist**, which was a healer class, but you wouldn't know it based on the large saber he carried. Griffin had a collection of throwing knives. They reminded me a bit of Louis and Firas from when we first met them. But instead of wanting to stay away from the fight, they were both eager to get in on the action.

The two elves had gotten ridiculously obnoxious tattoos on their necks the night before. The tats were of a large, flaming skull that was some sort of human/cat hybrid thing that looked like it was straight from a 1980's skateboard deck. Surrounding the skull in large letters in Syndicate Standard read the words "Princess Posse or Death." It had their hastily-

formed battalion name—the 103rd Recon Legionnaires—added to the bottom. And below that was the name of their squad, The Tenner Wraiths.

We were calling our largest, organized groups battalions, which were then organized into squads and then platoons. As Florin pointed out, our battalions were actually much bigger than standard-sized ones and should actually be called brigades, but it was now too late. Artwork and tattoos and signs had popped up everywhere in a matter of hours.

Donut was absolutely scandalized by the gaudy tattoos. Especially when Griffin told her that half the former crawlers were getting ink of their own unit emblems, though most were getting them in less obvious places than their necks.

“The units aren’t finalized yet!” Donut said to the two, grinning and gap-toothed elves as she scrutinized their necks. “And what is that supposed to be? A mouse? You know there aren’t bones in ears, right? Skulls shouldn’t have ears.”

“It’s a cat. And a human. You know, combined,” Griffin said.

Donut scoffed. “You mean like a cat girl? You know how I feel about cat girls, Griffin.”

“No. Not like that. It signifies all of us coming together. Meeps drew it. After he got out, he’s been surviving as a street artist in Alpert.”

“I don’t care if it was drawn by Blake Lively herself. It’s on your necks, and it’s huge. What if you get transferred?”

“We got more skin,” Morales said.

“Fuck yeah we do,” Griffin added. “If you do transfer us, I want to go to the 105th Scream Warriors. Have you seen their logo? As long as I’m tearing apart some of those mechanical Reaver fucks or disemboweling one of them snobby prick elves, I’m happy.” He slapped himself on the bare, right side of his neck. “Right here, warlord. I’ll wear it proudly, no matter where you put me. And if you transfer me a third time, I’ll get a third one in the front.”

Donut looked at me incredulously. “Was this how it was when you first joined the Coast Guard?”

“Uh, sort of,” I said.

I had to remind myself that these two guys were literally thousands of years old. They certainly didn’t act like it. Donut was right. They reminded

me of a pair of dumb 18-year-olds who'd joined the Marines and didn't know what the hell they'd just signed up for.

We were at the very edge of the map, hunting down one of the mob incursions into our territory. There were a few dozen of these groups popping up like cockroaches, and we'd spread out the hunting responsibilities to different squads. The newcomers needed the experience the most, but the active crawlers needed to grind, too, so all the groups were mixed. All volunteers.

The ball of mobs lurched by again, this time bulldozing over a tree about 50 feet away. The shriek of animals and monsters within groaned and hissed. It was much more tightly packed than the last one we'd seen. The thing was spinning in wide circles, like a car without a driver, scribbling ovals through the forest. It'd apparently been doing this for some time, as evidenced by the long, circular path of destruction behind it.

We were in the "new" area that got tacked on when the AI made the playing field larger. Based on the reports from the others, the mobs in here could be pretty much anything. There was no rhyme or reason or quests, kind of like the first floor. The AI was recycling mobs from all the previous floors, only changing them up a bit and strengthening them to be level appropriate. Imani's team had clashed with something called chilly goats, which had been mobs from the very first floor. Jurgen was leading a group not too far away, and they just fought danger dingo-riding kobolds, like from the second. This thing we faced now was clearly a riff on the Ball of Swine boss we'd also fought on the first floor, though the name had changed:

Rolling Battle Formation Ball. Level 70.

You don't want to get in this thing's way. It would really stink.

I hope you have some hydrogen peroxide, soap, and baking soda ready.

It wasn't listed as a boss at all, which was strange since the last one, which had been about $\frac{3}{4}$'s the size of this one, had been a borough boss.

"It's a lot different," Donut agreed again. "It's bigger than the ball of swine. And it's not filled with creepy, *Fifty Shades of Grey* orcs. At least I don't think it is. What *are* those things? They sound and smell revolting. Are they dead? They smell dead. If they're undead, we picked the wrong kind of mob to fight. Because, you know." She gave Rend a pointed glance, who was sitting on Mongo's head, jumping up and down with excitement.

One of the little meatball's weaknesses was eating undead flesh.

"I know that smell," I said. "I'm pretty sure it's not undead, but you're right. We need to make sure before we let him into the fray."

Donut scrunched up her face. "Either way, we need to hurry this up. Katia is starting her rehab treatment in a bit, and I don't want to miss it."

"Don't worry," I said. "Imani's team found that saferoom entrance buried about a mile and a half from here while scouting for our airship base. While Katia is under, I gotta do a thing, too, so I'll make sure we're back in time. Okay, next time it circles by..."

I was interrupted by a thrashing from behind us, followed by a pop and a mechanical whir. The scent of broken machinery and fire filled our hiding spot.

"Oh, goodness," came the voice from behind. "Oh my goodness. It appears Jamal has made another blunder. Mister Carl, I do fear I require assistance."

"Goddamnit, Jamal," I said, turning to see the giant hammerhead shark flopping on the forest floor. He was surrounded by a pile of shattered and steaming automaton parts. "You broke it again?"

"Mr. Carl. I must give you an apology," the hammerhead shark said. "I just did a little hop, and then the metal pieces did break again. Jamal has so many sorries to give, and Jamal is giving you all of them."

I moved to start picking up the pieces of broken legs all around the tattoo-turned flesh. That was the third one of these I'd hastily built for the overweight shark. It was similar to the new conveyance Katia had built for Tran, but much bigger. It was basically eight, double-jointed legs and a harness for the 17-foot-long sea creature, who had the anatomy of a regular, if not oversized, hammerhead shark, only he now breathed air. He could no longer breathe water, despite having gills. Up until now, the huge thing was literally flopping around like one of those zombie fish from the last floor. When he was one of Signet's paper tattoos, he'd been able to fly. Now he just flopped. He was, apparently, pretty good at it, but he couldn't move fast nor could he be subtle. I'd hastily built him a voice-controlled automaton harness so he could move quickly and quietly. It made him look like some horrifying spider hybrid, but it gave him much more control.

The whole thing was supposed to be a prototype. I could make something that was more rugged, but Katia could do it better. We wanted to first make sure the design worked.

My model required Jamal to call out to the legs and tell them where he wanted to go. When Katia was ready, her version would be able to read Jamal's thoughts and act accordingly.

Meanwhile, the prototype legs held Jamal's massive weight just fine. *Except* when he told the legs to hop, which he kept doing for some inexplicable reason. The magically-enhanced joints could handle jumping him into the air fine, but they just couldn't handle the landing more than once or twice. Three times now, we built the thing, and it worked great... up until Jamal instructed the legs to jump into the air.

"I told you not to hop at all. Now you're going to have to wait for Katia. I don't have any more of the extra-large leg joints, and she's going to be out of commission for several hours."

The shark waved his head back and forth in misery. "I have a great amount of shame and regret. Still, Mr. Carl. I don't see why Jamal shouldn't be able to hop. It is something Jamal always wished to do."

"Stop Elmo-ing, Jamal," Donut snapped. "We've talked about this. I have very few pet peeves, but this is one of them. I simply can't handle someone who refers to themselves in third person. It's upsetting to me, and it confuses Mongo."

Mongo made a confused peep.

Griffin and Morales both grunted with amusement. Bodi just looked at the shark impassively.

"I have found more apologies, and now they are yours, Miss Donut. It is my yearning that makes me forget myself, you see. I tell you, jumping is what Jamal... I mean it is what *I* wish to do."

"Yes, Jamal," I said. "We are all aware you want to jump."

"Oh, I do. I very much yearn for it, Mister Carl. Did you know I used to be an apex predator? And after that, I was a terror who could fly? Do you know how many clowns I have consumed? How many lemurs? Now I can't even do a little hop? It's a great yearning Jamal has. *I* have, I mean. I do wish to feel the wind in my gills. I wish to hop across the battlefield. Oh, what a wish. What a wish I have."

"My wish is for you to be quiet and to be patient," I said through gritted teeth. "We don't have time for this. Just stay here. We're going to break the ball apart and fight the pieces individually. If any come this way, feel free to chomp, but don't eat all of them. We know you're a great fighter, but you're already level 72, and we're trying to level all the newcomers up a bit."

Behind us, the rolling ball of screaming death made another pass through the underbrush, this time closer.

"It does smell really bad," Morales said.

"Like a waystation restroom in a Soother system during the sweet pepper festival," Griffin added.

"Jamal's sense of smell was once greatly enhanced, but that sense of smell is not working at all anymore. Not even one little bit. It is quite thoroughly gone... Just like his ability to hop."

"*Jamal*," Donut hissed.

I grabbed Rend and cradled him in my left arm as I pulled the impact hob-lobber and prepared my xistera. The little meatball was quivering with excitement. "Everyone shush. I'm going to nail it the next pass."

Mordecai and Morales both insisted this would work. These things were basically splitters, and just like the Ball of Swine on the first floor, the individual pieces were immune from all damage while they were in ball form. Once the ball itself sustained enough damage, it would break apart. The individuals inside would be dazed for a few moments, so we had to act quickly.

Ahead, the circling ball of mobs crushed through more trees. The thing was like twenty feet tall.

"Okay, buddy," I said down to Rend. "Do you remember what I said? I'm going to hold onto you, but when I tell you to bite, you chomp."

Rend grunted and snapped his mouth a few times. His little teeth clicked loudly.

"Good job." I circled, and I launched the hob-lobber directly at the rolling ball.

Bam!

The explosive hit the battle formation dead center. The explosion came, echoing loudly in the woods, but the ball didn't break apart like expected. A health bar appeared, just halfway down, as the stinking, rolling ball turned at a right angle and started barreling directly toward us. The furry, black and white ball sped up. A chorus of high-pitched, angry screams rose in volume.

"Well, that wasn't supposed to happen," Morales said.

"Oh, fuck," I said as I quickly pulled a second hob-lobber and tossed it. "Head's up!"

Splatch!

This one did the job. We all ducked as the ball exploded outward, causing dozens of small, waist-high mobs to rain through the forest. Most kept their forward momentum and blasted toward us like they'd been shot from a shotgun. They rained around us and over us. They crashed into trees and crunched into the ground, hitting and spinning and screeching.

One slammed into a tree right next to me, crunched loudly, and toppled over, dead. His fuzzy head was bent at a sickening angle. Another whiffed by and slammed into Griffin, who swore loudly as they tumbled away. Another splotted into Jamal, who yelped and started flopping in circles. Mongo screeched and jumped into a tree.

One of the creatures landed directly at my feet, hitting the ground like a meteor. His legs were broken, and his body steamed. He wasn't dead, but he was dazed and would be for several seconds. He only had a sliver of life left.

I quickly examined him. He wasn't undead.

Like I expected, he was a skunk.

Sort of.

This version was a bipedal creature, about two feet tall, furry and black with the typical long, white stripe down its back. It wore some rudimentary, cobbled-together armor, including a stick with a crude, black spike at the end. This was clearly supposed to be some sort of monster from the first or second floor, but buffed up.

Skank Skunk Warrior. Level 45.

You ever see those Pepé Le Pew cartoons? You know, the ones where they taught kids that rape was funny, especially when it was French people doing it to cats? These guys are like that, but instead of being extra horny, they just want to kill you.

Skank Skunks, if left to their own desires, have a generally peaceful attitude. At least at the individual level. But unfortunately for them, their leadership feels differently and uses a variety of spells and tricks to keep them in line.

These guys have a really gross, aerosol-based attack. You've been warned.

Everything that happened next took less than a full minute, but it seemed to take much, much longer.

"Go!" I cried as I retracted my scoop. I moved Rend into my left hand and thrust him toward the dazed creature.

“Chomp, Rend! Chomp!”

Nunghh! Nunghh!

Rend’s little mouth chattered up and down as he gnawed on the furry neck of the dying creature.

It was like I was holding the business end of a food processor in my hand. Blood sprayed from the point of contact as Rend gurgled with glee. He pushed through the neck of the poor skunk.

There were about three dozen of the mobs. Mongo squealed as he pounced from the tree, tearing into them. From my left, a spear shot through the air and skewered two at once. The spear spun back, cutting through a third skunk as it returned to Bodi, who’d somehow also climbed a tree.

Donut screeched and fired a pair of *Magic Missiles* before casting her newly-enhanced, level-15 *Bad Attitude* on the group. The effect wouldn’t be immediately obvious with them dazed.

With that first kill, Rend had already grown from meatball-sized to softball, and I could barely hold him in one hand. I kicked another dazed skunk, smushed down on its chest with my foot, holding it down as I jabbed Rend at its terrified face.

An unholy gurgling noise rose from the pet as he bit the thing’s nose off like it was made of cake. The giggling pet dropped from my hand and took a few more bites before hopping up on his own and running toward another skunk and launched himself at his leg. The monster toppled over, and Rend—now the size of a bowling ball—was on him, his high-pitched giggles already turning deeper, sounding almost like a clogged drain sucking for air.

To my right, three skunks were pulled into the ground as Chris dragged them under.

But now the remaining skunks were finally waking up, one by one. Donut’s *Bad Attitude* was taking hold, and instead of fighting back, they all turned to flee, all of them screeching with terror, abandoning their spears.

“Carl,” Donut called, sounding excited, pointing at a still-dazed skunk sitting in the middle of the carnage as his brethren panicked all around him. This mob looked just like all the others, except he was maybe a little smaller. He wore a blue, conical wizard hat with a glittering star and planet pattern on it. Little sparkles tinkled off the top of the hat.

Fancy Boy. Level 55 Skank Skunk Battle Wizard.

This is a special skunk with a very special set of skills. He knows the skills are special because his mom told him so. Don’t you dare tell him

otherwise.

Even though he's a higher level than the average warrior, he's actually a lot weaker. Still, he has a lot of spells designed to get the warriors to do what he wants, and he controls his fellow warriors with an iron claw.

Funny how that works, isn't it? In books and movies, the leader of a gang is almost always the physically strongest one, but in reality, oftentimes, it's the opposite. The leaders tend to be the richest, or they lead simply because of tradition. They tend to keep their power by engineering a situation where things would get temporarily worse if they were gone. It takes a certain amount of desperation before people finally stop caring about their immediate futures and start to look at the long term.

Killing him may cause unpredictable results.

"Nobody touch him! He's mine!" Donut shouted. She hit the creature with a magic missile, knocking the wizard skunk over onto his back, not quite dead, but certainly unconscious. His little hat went flying.

She moved to cast again, but she never got the chance. She never got the chance because that was when it happened.

And when it happened, it all happened at once.

It was worse than I expected.

Up until this moment, while the skunks all stank like a truckload of rotten fruit left to ferment in a barrel of hot horse piss, none of them, not even the dead ones, had yet activated their most dreaded skill.

Pssst. Pssst. Pssst. It sounded like a few dozen showerheads all turned on at once. Just for a second.

Oh fuck. Oh shit.

The battle wizard skunk guy must have been controlling the others, somehow keeping the attack in reserve. The instant he was knocked out by Donut, all their restrictions against using the attack were suddenly lifted. The panicked, trying-to-escape skunk creatures all let loose at once.

A green-tinged, aerosol mist filled the air, filling the area like the explosion of a smoke grenade, rising and billowing and growing like the mist itself was a mob.

I had multiple protections against poisons and cloud-based attacks, but I wasn't certain if any of that would protect me against a skunk's spray.

I didn't want to find out. A mere blink before the cloud hit me, I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase*, which caused me to go incorporeal and rush forward.

I launched forward, like I was shot from a ballista, rushing through a group of four skunks, all with their backs to me.

The act of me passing through their bodies unraveled them, turning their flesh and fur into rivulets of blood and guts and skin. Their armor was unaffected, and their weapons and breast plates clanked to the forest floor, literally wrapped in ribbons of flesh and fur. The sensation was like that of running through a sprinkler set to a very fine mist. A handful of new achievement notifications flashed.

I'd seen this sort of attack before. The rage elemental had done this to Yolanda. That quick realization sent a pang of revulsion through me.

I could keep myself non-corporeal only for five seconds. My head spun, but I had to react quickly. I activated Walk on Air and rushed upward, like I was running up a set of stairs, reaching a branch just above the rising cloud. Both skills ended, and I landed upon a branch, which bobbed.

I settled near Bodi, who stood on an even higher branch in the same tree. I didn't see how he'd gotten up there. He grunted with amusement and tossed his spear again into the mist. It appeared as if all the fleeing skunks were frozen again, but I wasn't certain why.

Mongo had also leapt into a neighboring tree, but he'd clearly gotten sprayed. He had a **Skanked** debuff blinking over his head, and he let out a miserable hack and started to loudly vomit down into the mist.

"Carl, help! Help!" Donut squealed from below. I couldn't see her.

As I prepared to jump down there to grab her, she suddenly appeared near Mongo with a flash. She'd puddle jumped, also into the tree. Right onto the same branch as the still-puking dinosaur. The whole thing wobbled ominously.

"Oh, god," I said, trying to keep my gorge down. The smell from Donut and Mongo was horrific, almost unbearable, and they were ten feet away.

Chris: I am buried. Tell me when it's safe to come up. I can smell it even down here.

Griffin, Morales, Jamal, and Rend were all still down there somewhere, and I could hear the sound of the two elves violently vomiting. The trees cracked and shook, and Jamal emerged from the mist, far to my left, rolling on the ground and shaking, like he was having a seizure. He was in the

midst of a feeding frenzy. His berserker state. He had the Fancy Boy skunk in his mouth, and he crunched loudly onto him. The shark made a little whoop, did a barrel roll, and then flopped back into the mist, which was starting to dissipate.

“I disabled the mobs,” Bodi said from the branch above me. “There will be suffering from our allies, but they will survive. We wait.”

That was, by far, the most words I’d heard from him.

I could now see the two elves on their hands and knees, vomiting as they tried to crawl away. They both had the **Skanked** debuff over their heads, but their health wasn’t going down. It appeared the attack made it so they stank and lost control of their stomachs. Not deadly on its own, but awful.

I could also see a beach ball-sized Rend, rolling in circles, Samantha style, cackling like a psychopath. He was moving from skunk to skunk, taking a single bite out of each one’s neck before moving on. The skunks all appeared to be paralyzed. Cone-shaped sprays of blood littered the forest floor. As I watched, Rend tentatively approached an already-dead skunk and tried to eat him whole, like a snake eating prey too big for it. He gave up after a moment and just chomped him in half.

“Carl,” Donut called from her branch as she gagged. “This is absolutely not acceptable. I don’t have anything in my inventory that says it gets rid of this debuff for...”

Crack!

She didn’t finish as she and Mongo plummeted back to the forest floor.

“Much suffering from our allies,” Bodi said.

“Sometimes Jamal is very much happy he can no longer smell. I suspect it’s quite unpleasant. Quite unpleasant indeed. I have never in my life seen such vomiting.”

I laughed but immediately regretted it as I took in a deep breath of the terrible stench. I’d already lost my lunch a few times and didn’t want to do it again. Some scents you got used to after a little bit. This wasn’t one of them.

Donut looked as if she was about to throttle the shark as we rushed through the woods. Instead, she turned her ire toward me. “I don’t know what’s so funny. Three hours, Carl! This is ridiculous.” She panted as she talked. She was absolutely miserable, but Mordecai said he had a potion that would help. It wouldn’t stop the reek, but it would blunt her ability to smell and taste.

I tried to move upwind of her and the others. We’d caged Mongo because he kept whimpering. I pushed away the separate chats from Florin, Imani, Elle, and Britney as I was too distracted to pay attention. Only Donut, Griffin, Morales, and Jamal had the debuff, though the shark wasn’t actually affected since he couldn’t smell. For whatever reason, it hadn’t taken hold on Rend at all. Chris had managed to avoid it as well. The debuff had finally gotten Griffin and Morales to shut up, and they marched sullenly behind us, their heads low as Jamal rolled toward them, looking for someone else to talk with.

The Skanked debuff caused them to temporarily stink, lowered their Charisma by 70%, and that was pretty much it. The vomiting was an unfortunate side effect. And worst of all, there was nothing one could do to turn the smell off. It lasted three hours, and that was that.

Donut jumped to my shoulder, oblivious of my discomfort. I gagged, grabbed her, and dropped her to the forest floor. She was so pissed, she barely noticed as she continued to rant.

“You know,” I said, interrupting her, “if this had happened to you during the before times, you’d probably stink a lot longer than three hours. In some ways, this ended up being better.”

She scoffed. “Hardly. Getting sprayed by a skunk is supposed to be something that happens to an idiot Labrador named Cletus. This isn’t something that would ever happen to an indoor, prize-winning cat. At least I got that hat, but it just smells something awful. All our other magical gear avoided getting stinky, but the hat is unbearably putrid. We don’t have a laundry machine. Do you think if I run it through my shower, it’ll get the smell out of it? Or maybe I can have the cleaner bot look at it. He likes cleaning that sort of stuff.”

“I doubt it will work,” I said. “If it’s anything like cat pee, it’s pretty permanent, no matter how many times you wash it. We’ll drain it and then toss it. And we should probably give the cleaner bot a break. That thing has been acting really stressed lately.”

“We’re all stressed, Carl, and that’s his job.”

Rend hopped by, cackling as he moved into the bush. He’d gone up to level 8 and remained about the size of a large beach ball. Level eight was a decent start because it meant he’d regenerate if he died, but it still wasn’t good enough. We needed to find more mobs for him to train on.

“And why wasn’t that thing affected when my poor Mongo got sick? It’s not fair!”

“He’s pretty resilient,” I said.

“Well, we should have had him collect the sample of the mist for Mordecai. I mean, really. Why do you think he wants some of that stuff anyway?”

“Because he wants us to collect everything.”

Ahead, Bodi appeared on the trail, pointing with his spear, indicating he’d found the path to the safe room. He disappeared again.

“Mongo and I are supposed to be moral support for Katia, and now I can’t do it! You’ll have to be there for her.”

“We need you on the southern front anyway. With you there, they can get those trenches built much faster. As for Katia, I was already planning on being there,” I said, sighing. I hadn’t told Donut exactly how much of Katia’s rehab I’d be involved in. We were attempting to kill two birds with one stone.

Sure enough, the saferoom entrance appeared on the edge of the map, along with a wide circle of dots. They were workers, who were building a small base around the remote outpost. “Come on. Just don’t get too close to anybody. You don’t want to leave a lasting impression on them.”

Elle: Okay, I’m back in our territory. I’m pretty sure I’ve found all the artillery batteries on both sides, but I can’t be 100 percent. But we got a new problem. They have another nasty surprise ready for us on the naga side. Remember when you said you wanted me to find out why those robot guys wanted pet leveling to be accelerated? Well, I found out.

Carl: Can’t wait. See you soon.

We had to pause for Morales to dry heave some more. The tattoo on his neck pulsated as he gagged.

The two elves didn’t appear nearly as enthusiastic about all this as they had been just an hour earlier.

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EVERLY

“You,” Everly hissed, pointing her leg at one of her two remaining mercenaries. He was an ogre with pinprick eyes and an oversized, crushed nose on his damnable, emotionless face. He’d spent the last several moments holding up the rock ceiling as sand poured in from all sides. The mantis didn’t know why, but the sight of the ogre standing there, straining and grunting made her unreasonably angry.

“Watching you try to hold up the ceiling is irritating me. You’re not going to stop it, so don’t bother. Dig, if you must. Just don’t stand there like that.”

The other mercenary, a dwarf, was on his hands and knees, desperately sifting through the sand, looking for the key hole. Everly watched him work for a few moments, panting as he dug with his hands, digging and digging through the meter-deep sand, looking for the tiny hole. They didn’t have the key. They hadn’t found it on the floor above before they’d had to jump down or get crushed. It was pointless.

Still, he worked. Blood ran down the dwarf’s thick, callused fingers as he dug. Tears streamed down the mercenary’s dirty face.

He’s right there, Everly thought as she watched him, strangely fascinated. Unlike the ogre, this one didn’t annoy her nearly as much, and she wasn’t certain why. *Right on the edge.* He still held out hope, no matter how unreasonable that hope was, and he clung onto it with everything he had.

But Everly could see it, like water seeping from a punctured skin. The hope draining from him with each passing moment.

She pitied him. For the first time, the mantis pitied one of her mercenaries. How many had she hired over these last several floors? Two, three dozen? Some, she'd fired in a rage. Some had simply disappeared and still remained on her payroll, much to her annoyance.

The rest had died.

The Inevitable Ruin. That's what their queen used to call this moment. The moment you realized there was no hope, nothing left to do, and all that was left was to die and reflect upon what you've already done while you waited. To ruminate on how you've helped the colony, and to beg forgiveness of God for not sacrificing enough.

When Everly was younger, she used to think she'd be like the dwarf if and when she faced this moment. The Inevitable Ruin. She would fight to the end, unable to accept it.

Yet, here she was. Sitting in the sand, doing exactly what her mother, the queen, said she would do. What all her kind did. She'd accepted death, and all that was left was to ponder.

She almost laughed out loud. The younger version of herself would be raging right now. *It's not over*, she'd say. *It's not over until you're dead. Get down there and dig, damn you.*

And by younger, Everly meant the version of herself from just before the demons had come to her world. It'd only been half a turn. Yet, it seemed so long ago. Lifetimes. She'd left the colony just a few days before that. Set out on her own because she couldn't abide the rules, the lack of individualism in mantis culture. She'd become an outcast, left to wander the sward on her own.

This is it, she thought now, watching as the giant ogre also fell to his knees and into the sand. He dug with desperate eagerness, causing a great cascade to fan out into the air, like a mole excavating a new burrow. Half the sand the ogre tossed was landing in the hole the other mercenary was working on, who didn't seem to notice.

Above, the ceiling groaned and cracked as it continued to lower. Lights dotted the ceiling, the only illumination in the room, giving it a yellow, sickly glow.

This eighth floor had been a strange world. A long, flat, grass-covered lowland meant to mimic the sward. But hidden in the grass were thousands of round holes of various sizes, each one leading downward to a different

area, ever going down and down like the labyrinth of a cavern wasp colony. The stairwells to the ninth floor were supposedly somewhere at the bottom.

But instead of going down through the holes, there'd been another option. In the very middle of the grassland was a tall, wide tower, rising about fifty levels into the sky. On the front door of the tower was a simple note that read **Warning: If you enter the tower maze, you must proceed to the top before you'll be allowed to go back down. No teleporting or phase allowed in the tower.**

There'd been no other information than that. No indication if it was necessary to use the tower or not. The others debated whether or not to risk entering. It seemed like *someone* had to go in there and try it. For all they knew, it was the only way to open up the stairwells far below.

And then, Everly received the benefactor box from her sponsor, who so far had been quite generous with gifts. The sponsor's name was Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited.

The item in the box was called **Gordon's Compass of Vertical Labyrinth Management. 49 uses.**

It was a simple device, and it appeared it was going to be enormously helpful. It showed the bearer the "quickest and safest" path through a maze.

But there was a problem. The description specifically stated it wouldn't work in subterranean mazes. It was clear that the compass was meant to be used to navigate the tower.

So, Everly and her ten mercenaries decided to enter the tower while several other crawlers waited at the bottom. Some of her fellow mantises had offered to go with her. She refused their help, like she always did.

Each stairwell upward ended in a landing that consisted of five one-way doors, with supposedly a different danger behind each one. Each time, the compass pointed to the "safest and fastest" path. Each time she opened the safe door, the other doors disappeared, revealing a small, empty hallway and another set of stairs, and that was it. No danger. The compass could only be used 49 times, and the tower was 50 levels high.

With the help of the compass, Everly and her team managed to carefully creep their way up the fifty flights of stairs in a matter of hours. When they used the compass the 49th time—to go from the 49th to the 50th floor—it pointed to a single door before shattering into a dozen pieces.

At the very top of the tower, they came to a large, round room. At this point, Everly had received multiple awards for viewership. She wasn't one

to feel much emotion other than annoyance, but she did allow a glimmer of excitement to creep in. A fan box. She'd heard of such things from others, but she'd never been the most popular. But now she was finally getting recognized. The entire center system was watching her, alone, traveling up this tower on a mission to possibly help save her fellow mantises.

That was a good, unfamiliar feeling, and she savored it. She wondered what her mother would've thought.

Sitting in the middle of the room upon a pedestal was nothing more than a folded tent of paper. She warily skittered forward and picked it up. It was a note, and the moment she touched it, the system read the note out loud.

The announcement came in a voice she'd never heard before.

Never trust your life to Gordon Waystation Outfitters. There's no safe or cheap path to safety.

This dead end was sponsored by Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited.

"Don't get caught with nowhere to go."

"What?" she said out loud, not understanding. It took a moment for it to sink in.

It was an advertisement. The whole tower had been an advertisement. She'd seen a few of those throughout the dungeon. Traps that announced they were sponsored by so and so before they went off. The announcer man said it was a pilot program this season.

But this... this was something else. This entire tower had been built by her own sponsor, and they'd given her an item that deliberately led her here. The item was named after "Gordon Waystation Controls." A competitor of her sponsor.

Humiliation. And then anger.

That anger washed over her. An anger so powerful that it temporarily blotted out the fear. An advertisement? They had used her for an advertisement? How fucking *dare* they?

There was a loud, grinding noise, and a trap door appeared in the floor.

You may now make your way downward. The path you used upward is no longer available.

She pulled up the scratchpad and scrawled an angry note in the cookbook, but she was interrupted by a new sound. The roof above them started to slowly crush down. Her mercenaries started to shout and point. They moved to the stairs, which led down to a landing with four doors.

Now, only ten flights down, and only three of them were left alive.

Everly wondered if this would've happened if she'd allowed some of the others to go up the tower with her. Maybe one of the others had heard of this Gordon Waystation company and would've figured out the whole thing was a trap.

But she'd insisted on staying alone this whole time. Even after she'd entered the dungeon and found thousands of her fellow mantises, all equally confused and afraid. She'd *wanted* to work with them. They'd wanted to work with her.

Still, she'd struck out on her own, determined to fight it all in her own way. Her only companions were the NPCs and the invisible words etched on her prayer mat.

The dwarf finally stopped digging. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He reached up, almost able to touch it now.

"The Inevitable Ruin."

She'd whispered it out loud.

That's when it had happened, wasn't it? Not now, here in this damn tower. It happened when I abandoned the others. So much earlier than I realized.

Next to her, the ogre, who hadn't said a single word since she'd hired him, changed. He, too, had stopped digging and now lay prone atop the sand like he was going to sleep, his head turned toward hers. She watched the change happen. There was a flash, like a screen booting up, deep in the back of his small, black eyes.

"Maybe there's more to it than this," the ogre said just as the slow-moving ceiling kissed the side of his face. His body shifted and was pushed into the sand. "Maybe it's not inevitable, like you say."

She reached her arm out and touched the ogre just as it started to hurt.

Class: Explosives Engineer.

Race: Primal.

Birth Race: Sward Mantis.

Top Level: 62

Dungeon Exit: crushed to death on the eighth floor.

Author of the fifth edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Dead.

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TIME UNTIL CEASEFIRE ENDS: 31 HOURS.

“Okay,” Mordecai said as Katia sat nervously on the hospital cot. I paced back and forth behind them, equally anxious. I had a bed of my own waiting for me. “This is going to take about eight to ten hours for you, Katia. Carl, I’m not sure how long your session will take. It should be significantly less, but I don’t think anyone has actually tried this outside a drug den before, so who knows.”

He placed the fizzing, green jar on the counter. It looked like thick, carbonated slime. The concoction made a hissing noise. “This jar is enough for both of you. It’s basically two hits of Glory Bound, but compounded with a subdermal gel and mixed with a potion called ‘Tough Love.’ Kinda like that anti-alcohol potion I gave to Louis and Firas on the fifth floor, but with a long brew time. I started making this on the previous floor, and it has to sit nice and long before it gains its potency, and we are now in that window. It goes stale fast, so it’s now or never. The dose I’m giving to you, Carl, I’m also going to combine with another potion called ‘*Removal Order*.’ That way we’ll be visiting the spider’s memories instead of your own.” He paused, swallowing hard. “I hope.”

“*Removal Order* will work for such a powerful entity?” Bucket Boy asked. The crocodilian kid, a former attendant of the Penis Parade, stood in the room and somehow looked pale, despite being covered with scales.

“Isn’t that for weaker possessions?” The NPC looked over at me nervously. He leaned in toward Mordecai and whispered loud enough for the whole room to hear, “Like, won’t his head explode if it doesn’t work right?”

“Wait, what?” I asked.

“No, his head won’t explode,” Mordecai said. “Not the way we’re doing it. Probably not.”

I sat on the cot. “Jesus,” I muttered.

We’ll both die. Don’t do this, Carl.

“Shut the fuck up,” I said, slapping myself on the chest.

Katia had only taken the insidious, addictive drug Glory Bound once, which had caused her to re-live her favorite memory. But the drug was terribly addictive and came with several nasty side effects, one of which was her losing her grasp on what was real or not. We’d only seen a few minor examples of this so far, but we needed to get this taken care of now before it got worse.

And that required her to take Glory Bound a second time, but with a version of the drug modified by Mordecai. Katia would go under, but she would be forced to confront something from her past. I didn’t know what that was, and I didn’t ask. That was her business, and it was something she’d have to face on her own. Based on the hollow look in her eyes, I knew it would be something terrible. She trembled.

We weren’t inside of a saferoom, but in a newly-built field hospital at our base. Katia would be unconscious but constantly monitored, and saferooms had some strange rules about this sort of thing. Mordecai insisted it would have to be outside.

As for me, the treatment required someone to remove my new toe ring once I was conked out. That also required me to do this independent of the safety of the guild.

Outside, the clanging, pulsing sound of rapid construction continued unabated. The multi-layer, anti-magic shell was being erected over the base. They were behind schedule, and I could hear shouting from several directions. This new shield looked like a kid’s jungle gym, and it was designed so different mages could cast spells in different hexagons of the structure, like tiles, allowing for stronger protection and denying the enemy a single point of failure. Killing a mage usually canceled out any of their active protection spells.

“Carl,” Rosetta said. “If you’re still under when Katia comes back, I’ll induce the wake-up sequence. You should be able to initiate the ejection yourself, since it won’t be your own memory.”

“Even with the ring off?”

“Once you’re under, the ring shouldn’t matter, but we’ll make sure it’s put back on before you wake up. Imani will cast a protection spell on you, too, so that should bolster your defenses. You fed your Emberus shrine before you came out here, no?”

“I did, but I shouldn’t be down that long, should I? And what if I am in one of my own memories?”

“Then it will probably be unpleasant,” Rosetta said.

“What about Katia?” I asked, looking over at the woman next to me. She was in her regular, human form, and she looked so small in the bed. She caught my eyes and smiled. She reached over to grab my hand, but she was too far away. Rosetta moved between us.

Edgar the tortoise appeared, walking slowly into the room. He made slow, painful progress toward Katia. “Even though you’re both getting the same drug,” Edgar said, “you two are undergoing two very different treatments. Once Katia is under, she’s on her own. If we wake her up early, it could be fatal.”

“That’s a cheerful thought,” Katia said.

In the room were Edgar, Mordecai, Rosetta, Bautista, Imani, a few former crawlers I didn’t know, and Bucket Boy the crocodilian strip-club attendant NPC, who was also a low-tier healer. He was present to assist Imani, and once the fighting began, this field hospital would be his domain along with some of the other healers.

Bautista remained in the back of the room, pacing back and forth, chewing on one of his finger claws. I wasn’t too clear on the state of Bautista and Katia’s relationship, but she’d asked for him to be here. Based on the flashing of their eyes, they were talking privately.

Donut remained in the guild, in her bathroom, taking shower after shower in a fruitless attempt to get the stench out of her and Mongo. Rend was with them, apparently a big fan of the shower. Donut had sent no less than two dozen messages in the past ten minutes, demanding to know what was happening.

I took a long breath. I touched the tattoo on my chest. The eye was open and blinking, angrily looking back and forth, desperately attempting to cast

this or that. I had my *Wisp Armor* spell active, which added extra protection against Shi Maria's attempts to take over my body. Despite that, she'd just been able to talk in my mind. We had to do this now.

We had several options on how to deal with the spider's presence attached to my body. All were dangerous. None were guaranteed. This particular method was ensured to be painful whether it worked or not, but it came with the benefit of having to use a powerful potion that Mordecai had already made.

I worried about that. Whenever there was a coincidence or a convenience—not that anything about this was convenient—I knew that there was another hand involved in all of this. Whether it was the show runners or the AI or some combo of both. And that always meant some sort of unwelcome fuckery was about to go down.

But what other choice did I have? This was our only opportunity to deal with this problem before it was too late

According to both Mordecai and Rosetta, this particular drug—Glory Bound—was based on a real-life, outside-the-inner-system medication originally designed to help train people to do various, difficult tasks. It was a two-part process that first involved subliminal conditioning over a long period of time. And then the trip portion of the drug was used to unlock the knowledge. But, as with most drugs that could do such a thing, it started to get abused before the whole process was replaced by some other technique.

Despite being discontinued, the drug and its effects persisted in the dungeon, used for literally dozens of quests over the seasons, or as a sort of trap, which is exactly what it had been for Katia. Sometimes the drug's effects were tweaked to fit into a particular storyline. But more than once, there had been “possessed” quests that required the victim to find the drug den in the Desperado Club to get themselves cured.

In order for Katia to clear the physical effects of this addiction, she needed to re-live this experience, whatever it was.

For me, it was more complicated. I needed to enter the memory of the spider, who also would experience her “worst” memory. I would have to witness this dream, whatever it was, and because of the drug Mordecai added to the mix—*Removal Order*—I could choose to lock Shi Maria in the memory at the end. She would remain forever trapped.

The tattoo would remain on my chest, but I would have control over it. I would gain a skill or two, if I did it properly. And that's what worried me.

There were no specific instructions on how to “lock” her in the dream. It would manifest itself in a different way each time. Mordecai said it would probably be clear.

But if I failed to properly trap her, I’d wake back up and would have to deal with a very pissed-off entity inside of me. We’d be back to square one.

“Here we go,” Mordecai said as he slipped on a glove. “This potion is a gel I’m putting on your skin.” He took a handful and started to rub it on Katia’s neck. He then added another potion to the jar of goo and slopped a cold blob of the green stuff on me. It fizzed and kind of tickled. “It’ll take about five minutes to start working, but it’s safer and more effective if you’re unconscious when it takes hold. So wait until your potion cooldown has passed, and then I’m going to knock you both out.” He pulled off the glove with a deft finger and dropped it into the jar as Imani handed each of us a potion.

“Drink these as soon as you can,” Mordecai said. “This will help the sleep come fast. The potion will make you a bit loopy. You might see some weird shit, but it won’t last long.”

Potion of Somnolent Embrace.

This won’t remove your worries or your bad dreams for more than but a moment. But it will ease them long enough to let you sleep. Sometimes this is all we can hope for.

Gently brings you to rest until you fall asleep.

Katia looked at the potion, gave me a quick, nervous smile, and then shrugged.

“Skál,” she said, drinking the potion manually.

A moment later, she added, “Oh wow, this stuff is great.”

“I don’t have the fancy bed you guys have,” Mordecai said. “It’s what I use sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Rosetta asked.

“What do you know about it?” Mordecai asked her.

“I saw Odette’s story about you the other day.”

“Her *what*?”

I drank the potion down, and I instantly felt a warm tingling rush over me. I turned my head toward Katia. She had a golden, glowing halo over her. The others in the room were still talking. Mordecai was growling something at Rosetta, but all I could hear was Katia.

“Do you want to hear a secret?” Katia asked me as her eyes got heavy. Her voice was loud and clear.

“Sure,” I said.

“My favorite memory and my worst memory are the same thing. I’m going to the same place I was last time. I hope that doesn’t mess this up.”

“Katia,” I heard myself say. “Quick. Grab my hand. We can do it together.”

“Okay,” she said, reaching out. Her arm stretched and grasped onto my wrist. She started to twist and twist, like a vine growing up my arm. She started to pull me from the table.

“No,” someone shouted. “Separate them!” Edgar. His voice was distant. Not nearly as clear.

Imani was there, unraveling us. “No touching, you two,” she said, her voice surprisingly gentle, yet so far away. She was wearing gloves. Why was she wearing gloves? “It’ll confuse the dreams.”

“But we’re still touching,” I whispered as my consciousness fled. I could feel it, the river, flowing from myself and crashing against the rocks of Katia’s mind. There was no purchase there, no permanent path back to me, but still, my thoughts crashed into hers, like a tsunami, and for a moment, I flooded onto her, overwhelming it all.

I heard her gasp, and I could see things there. I saw her mind.

And with the backslash, I briefly touched the minds of others nearby. Imani, who was terrified. Mordecai, equally wary but also sad. Rosetta who just seemed so very tired yet filled with a deep, familiar rage. Edgar, who was worried. These were just flashes, like my hand running through a flame. The moment only lasted microseconds, yet I saw deeper and longer than I should.

I shouldn’t be seeing this.

Katia was the one I’d truly crashed against, and while it was still short, the glimpses I felt of her lasted longer. Told me more.

She, too, was afraid. Afraid that she was a burden. Ashamed. Ashamed that we were all doing this for her. And angry, too. Angry at herself. Angry at the world. Angry at... at... Me? Why would she be angry with me?

I quickly started to recede.

Would I get away in time? I could feel the event horizon looming. The precipice of the dream rushing up to meet us. And behind me, another presence menaced. Two presences. *Three* presences, but one well hidden. I

tried to retreat, fleeing away from Katia's dream. She needed to do that alone. I needed to turn around and face this, whatever it was.

Katia stood beside me, her arm still twisting like a vine around my own as the two sides crashed toward us, like a pair of hands clapping together in a clumsy attempt to capture a bug.

"It's not that I'm angry with you," she said in the microsecond before the two hands joined. "I'm just mad that you let people hurt you. You meet someone, you start to care for them, and then it becomes..."

She was interrupted by a warlord notification. The sound was distant and hollow, yet it was enough to cut her off completely.

The Lemig Sortion has offered you free passage to their headquarters in order to treat for peace. They are offering...

Slap.

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I BLINKED, AND I WOKE UP.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

I wasn't in the Icelandic hospital anymore. My mind reeled.

Is this still the dream?

I slowly looked at my hands, confused.

I was covered with blood. What the hell?

Quest Failed. The Bedlam Bride.

Katia, I thought. Where was *Katia*? I thought of the memory, of the dream we'd just shared. Of Annie, the little baby girl. Of that prick of an ex... boyfriend? Husband? Fannar was his name. Of the cancer diagnosis. After all those hoops, after all she'd overcome. They'd caught it early. She'd be okay. But, despite that... it'd come with a terrible price. I understood, finally. *Katia's* addictions. Fannar had told them. I didn't understand why. She'd been clean for so long, struggled so long, so hard to stand on her own feet. And then a one, two punch. By dungeon standards, all of this was almost nothing. Just another one of life's shitty events. A debuff. A minor setback. But to *Katia*, it had been everything. A shattering.

I thought of the social worker coming to pick me up from the interrogation room. *Come on now*, she'd said. *Come on now*.

There was screaming.

I was still groggy. A lot of screaming. What was going on? Where was I? I was standing. Standing in the middle of a room. Standing in a circle of

blood and corpses.

My eyes focused on a goblin thing. He was in the familiar, cavernous room with me, and he had a gun in his hands. He aimed it right at my head and pulled the trigger. The goblin froze, and the gun didn't go off. The word **Naughty** appeared over the goblin's head. There were multiples of the creatures in the room. Most were dead. One was on the floor, sobbing as he dragged himself away from me. His legs were gone, and he smeared bright, bright blood on the tiled floor.

I know this place, I thought.

And the goblin, too. The one screaming with no legs. I recognized him as well. His name was Luke. He was a representative from the Lemig Sortion. As I watched, he groaned, and then he died.

Corpse of Luke. Level 64 Lemig Goblin.

General in the Democratic Sortion.

Killed by a fellow soldier under the control of Shi Maria.

I... I was in the high elf castle. The castle from the sixth floor. We'd called it the Sugar Cube. We were in one of the ballrooms, but the walls were cracked all around. I shook my head. This didn't make sense.

"Sorry," a new, gravelly voice said. "It's being ruled an AI action, not an attack. The ceasefire has no rules against teammates fighting one another. Or monsters. You could've fought back against the unaffiliated NPC while he was under control of that thing, but you waited too long. Now that he's no longer possessed, you can't touch him while the ceasefire is in effect. The AI is claiming he had a notification over his head while he was vulnerable."

I turned around to face the voice. I blinked a few times, still completely disoriented. There was something wrong with my eyesight, and it was making me dizzy. There were two aliens standing there in the midst of all the carnage. God, how many dead were in here? It looked to be fifty, or more.

The one who'd been speaking was a tall, purple-skinned creature. A dreadnaught. The notice over him said his name was **Panford. Adjutant for the Democratic Sortion.** The alien he was speaking to was a giant, fuzzy thing. He was a good seven feet tall and looked like an upright caterpillar. **Commander Stockade. Level 76 Phase Sorcerer. Warlord of the Democratic Sortion.**

“An AI action?” Commander Stockade shouted. He was screaming at the dreadnaught. The caterpillar’s voice surprised me. He had that same, weird accent as the rest of their kind, even though the rest were mostly goblins. He sounded like an aged surfer dude straight out of southern California. “He killed half of my family, and it’s considered an AI action? This is utter, complete orcsbit. I want to file an immediate appeal!”

I continued to look around. I was starting to realize this wasn’t a dream. Was I really here? How in the hell had that happened? The entire ballroom was filled with blood. It looked as if someone had set off a bomb.

Also, I realized, this wasn’t the same goodwill ballroom I’d been in for the Butcher’s Masquerade. The exits were in different places. I suspected this was the third one. The one near the top of the castle. Queen Imogen’s private ballroom. When we’d transferred this castle to the ninth floor, I knew it’d landed in the territory of the Lemig Sortion, and they’d started using it as their headquarters.

“You can’t file an appeal,” Panford the adjutant said. “They’re all dead. You can’t appeal them back to life. If you had informed me of your ill-conceived plan, I could have told you why it wouldn’t have worked. That entity is a demonic demigod. Not a full demon. Carl was not possessed in the traditional manner. You planned on turning Carl into a vegetable and having the spider kill everyone in the room back in the other base. Instead, Carl is safe, and now your throne room is destroyed.”

Commander Stockade undulated his caterpillar body back and forth, oddly reminding me of one of those waving, inflatable tube men they shoved in front of car dealerships. “This is cheating! He turned into that thing and killed the entire room in seconds! That’s not how this works! The AI changed the rules.” His voice was starting to crack. “Luke, oh gods, Luke is dead. My beautiful, beautiful Luke.”

My eyes caught the timer in the corner of my vision. We had 20 hours until the ceasefire ended.

I’d lost 11 hours.

“What happened is exactly what always happens when you attempt to improperly extract an entity that powerful. This is your fault. This very thing happened three seasons ago,” the dreadnaught said, jabbing a finger at the caterpillar. “I asked you where you got your information, and you refused to answer. All spies must be disclosed to adjutants. You know this, and you have made no such declaration. Unless you can prove you have a

mole in the Princess Posse camp, I am going to assume you have an external influence assisting you, which is clearly cheating. You and Architect Houston both planned this using someone observing the feed from outside the dungeon. I'm afraid I'm going to have to call a foul."

"On us? You're calling a foul on *us*? We are fighting for our lives here, and you're worried about the fucking *rules*? When I get out of here, I will make you pay."

"Both the Lemig Sortion and the Madness will receive heavy sanctions for this stunt. The specifics will come down shortly. In addition, threatening your adjutant comes with additional penalties."

"What the hell happened?" I asked, coughing the words.

"You," Commander Stockade said, waving one of his short, caterpillar arms at me. "You planned this! I don't know how you did it, but you planned it this way!"

I was going to vomit.

Donut: CARL, CARL. WHERE ARE YOU? KATIA IS STILL HERE, BUT YOU DISAPPEARED. YOU TELEPORTED AWAY, AND NOBODY KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED. OUR ADJUTANT LADY SAID YOU KILLED A BUNCH OF LEMIG PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN CASTLE, BUT IT'S THEIR OWN FAULT. SHE'S NOT MAKING SENSE. MORDECAI AND ROSETTA ARE BOTH LAUGHING LIKE THEY'VE GONE CRAZY.

Carl: I don't know what's happening, but I'm okay for right now.

Baroness Victory: Hold tight, Carl. They're asking for a minor quorum. I am coming to you. Don't make any rash movements or actions. You're safe if you don't move.

There was a flash, followed by a second flash and a notice.

A Second Adjutant has Entered the Room.

A Third Adjutant has Entered the Room.

A Minor Quorum has been achieved. All local hostilities must be paused while a field ruling is considered.

There was new shouting all around me as mercenaries entered the ballroom from all the doors. A second and a third mercenary—these were large, bugbear-looking things I'd never seen before—attempted to fire their weapons at me. All got paused. There were no chairs here. I had to sit, so I sat on the floor, in the midst of all the carnage. I had no idea what had happened, how I got here, or what had happened while I was under. My

head continued to swirl. I remembered the dream, how it started. I remembered the spider. Not Shi Maria, but a different one. A male. Her husband. First a spider, then a human. I remembered how, near the end, Shi Maria had also entered the room, mocking me, telling me I'd be sorry, but then she saw the other spider, and she'd changed. She burst into a rage. She killed him, her own husband. She'd devoured him while she sobbed. She'd disappeared and then reappeared a few moments later, she'd curled into a ball, right there in the hospital in Iceland.

But then it got fuzzy. The husband had returned. Hadn't he?

I'd failed the Bedlam Bride quest. The quest to bring her to Larracos. Did that mean she was gone? If so, how had she killed the entire room?

And how the hell had I gotten here? I was now on the other side of the map.

I hoped Katia's treatment had worked. I suspected it had. That was the impression I had from the dream. My treatment had also worked. Sort of. It had worked according to her husband, who'd reappeared at the end. The order of what happened was a jumble, just like a real dream. What was his name? Hapanzi? He'd been a god.

I have her now, son, he'd said. She is good and trapped. You can always set her free, if you must. But do not unless all is lost.

I could now see from the eye on my chest. It was still a tattoo, but I could feel it when it was open. I had to make a conscious effort to keep the eye closed. Another wave of nausea flooded me.

Katia: Carl, where are you?

Carl: I think I'm in the high elf castle! I have no idea what the hell is going on.

Katia: They're saying you teleported away right when it started, but you remained translucent, like you were in two places at once, and at the end, you completely disappeared. And now your adjutant is saying you killed a room full of the Lemig goblin guys. She said something to Mordecai, and he fell over laughing and hasn't explained why. Donut is here losing her mind. The Lemig guys knew the precise moment you went under, and they attempted something to ruin the procedure. Something using the warlord chat I don't understand. That in itself wasn't against the rules, but them using outside information is. The fact it backfired on them is irrelevant.

Carl: Holy shit.

Katia: Carl, we left her there. We left Shi Maria alone in that room with Annie.

Carl: It's not real. It was just a memory. The spider is trapped, and she's not trapped in you. Her husband said so. But your Annie. The real Annie, she's gone. They can't touch her.

Katia: Carl...

Carl: It worked, right? Did they say it worked?

Katia: I think so. It's not like a switch that one flips on and off. We won't really know right away. But, yes. I think it worked.

Carl: Then that's all that matters.

Shi Maria wasn't truly gone, but she *was* trapped. I remembered now. She was like an egg inside of me. One I could break at any time, but I had to do it myself.

Just like Carl's Doomsday Scenario. I was gathering quite the collection of weapons of mass destruction.

That should've been an enormous relief. It was not.

I tried opening the third eye, but I clenched it shut a moment later. I had to close it. There was power there. So much power. I had to keep it closed.

“THIS IS AN OFFICIAL FIELD RULING ADJUDICATION,” PANFORD THE dreadnaught said to the pissed-off caterpillar and the stoic Viceroy. He waved his hand, and a screen appeared floating in the air.

We all sat in a new room. I was segregated from the others by about ten feet, and I was still dripping with blood like I’d been bobbing for apples in a vat of the stuff. I had it on my face. In my hair. This was the private kitchen of the late Queen Imogen, off to the side of the ballroom. The table was made of some rich, finely carved wood, and in moments, it was covered with my bloody handprints.

Baroness Victory and the other two adjutants also congregated together in the middle of the table, dividing me and the two warlords. They’d been conversing amongst themselves for some time now before the dreadnaught cleared his throat and started talking.

There was a bag of literal Earth cat food sitting on the counter, abandoned and leaning against the wall. The large bag was closed with a little plastic clip. It was some generic, cheap kind of cat food that Donut would never touch. The yellow bag featured a happy, cartoon cat and was called “Meow Time.” There was also a sticker on the bag, “a gift from Pet Angels.” Pet Angels was a Seattle charity that gave free pet supplies to people who couldn’t afford it otherwise. Its presence here was so out of place that it was physically jarring. Is that what Ferdinand was eating when he lived here in the castle? Was it what he was eating before? If so, how did

it get here? I couldn't take my eyes off it, and I had an overwhelming urge to try to steal it.

There were six of us in the room. The three warlords and their adjutants. Architect Houston—the masked, Viceroy leader of the Madness—sat at the other end of the wooden table, unmoving. It appeared he was already in the castle but hadn't been in the ballroom when it happened, whatever “it” was. The adjutant for the Madness was a tiny, floating Bune. The little dragon creature's name was Opiee.

Stockade and I had filed into the kitchen like a pair of children being called into the principal's office. No guards were allowed to follow. A group of the bugbear mercenary cooks were shooed from the room as we entered. Commander Stockade quivered with rage. Yellow goo leaked from his fuzzy, compound eyes, and he smelled like must and dirt. Even across the room, I could smell his rising stench. The angry alien kept muttering “Luke” over and over.

Architect Houston, the Viceroy leader of team Madness, had entered a moment later. He didn't appear to have a care in the world, not that it was difficult to put up such a façade. His white, featureless mask was slightly different than the other masks his kind wore. A small, red teardrop icon sat in the very center of the white guise. He wore long, flowing, Jedi-like robes that were just as starkly white as his mask, like a pope. The robes flowed strangely as he walked in, giving the implication his anatomy was strange. I knew under that mask, he had a demonic, alien face with lots of terrifying teeth, like a mix between a Predator alien and a goblin with no lips.

On the floating screen, a close-up view of me on the cot in the infirmary appeared, followed by a second screen showing the caterpillar in the middle of the ballroom, surrounded by dozens of the Lemig goblins. On the screen, Stockade's compound eyes flashed like a disco ball as he spoke with someone.

“Stockade,” Panford the adjutant continued as the screens moved, “your plan was both simple and brilliant. Using the warlord chat, you offered peace terms to warlords Carl and Donut. With those terms, you requested a face-to-face parlay. And then you extended an invite directly to Carl using your level-15 *Summon Ally* spell. You extended this invitation after Carl quaffed the sleep potion and just as he was taking the medicine to treat his demonic infestation. Since Carl was still, technically, conscious when you made your offer, the request was delivered directly to his interface. You also

knew that while most command-and-request inquiries are disabled in certain unconscious states, properly delivered warlord inquiries remain persistent even during certain levels of unconsciousness.”

The left side of the screen switched to my interface, showing **Accept Teleport Request? You will teleport here:** Followed by a map showing the location of the Lemig base. The screen split once more, returning to me passed out on the cot. It showed Rosetta, Bucket Boy, and Mordecai hovering over me while Imani pried off my toe ring.

“You knew that while Carl was incapacitated, the plan for them was to allow Shi Maria to take over Carl’s consciousness during the dream sequence. While in that state, the entity would have no ability to control Carl or interact with any of his systems, such as casting spells, sending messages, or interacting with his inventory. However, because of your brilliantly timed request, the entity controlling Carl could—and indeed did—accept the invitation to parlay.”

The screen showed the teleport request getting accepted the moment my toe ring was pulled off by Imani.

The dreadnaught turned to the other two adjutants—the orc and the bune. “Are we agreed on these facts so far?”

“Agreed,” Opiee the adjutant for the Madness said.

“Yes,” Baroness Victory agreed. I caught her eye, and she winked at me from across the room.

There was an audible chime from the system, but no other notification.

“This is bullshit,” Commander Stockade muttered again. “This was supposed to be a game, and now we’re literally fighting for our lives. Yet, you fools are pretending like nothing has happened. You’re complicit in all this. You’re just as complicit as the mudskippers, the mantids, and the Valtay whose ineptitude let this happen. You need to be helping us escape, not tightening...” He trailed off, almost like a child getting distracted by something shiny. “Luke is gone. Beautiful Luke is no more. He was real. A real life snuffed away.”

I was about to say something, but the sudden rage that built up in my chest temporarily muted my voice. Still, I found myself on my feet, my fists clenched.

Architect Houston, who hadn’t said a word or even moved since he sat at the table, turned his head in my direction. It was barely a move, but his neck made a slight creaking noise, like from a wooden ship.

Easy. Easy.

Victory put up her hand and motioned me to sit.

“Nobody is happy with their current circumstances,” Victory said to the caterpillar, “but the rules are the rules. We all know what will happen if we don’t continue as normal.”

“If we survive this, you will *all* be sorry,” Stockade said. He was so angry, he was crying as he spoke. “I swear it.”

“Noted,” Victory said. She bowed toward the dreadnaught. “Please continue.”

Panford nodded. Shi Maria appeared on the screen, spinning. “The entity contained within Carl is basically a special Reaper Spider Minion merchant. Part demon and part demi-god. You, Stockade, knew that the spider would jump at the ability to escape, which is exactly what would’ve happened if things had gone as you anticipated.”

Panford looked at me. “Do you know how the *Summon Ally* spell works?”

“Of course,” I said.

That was a lie, but I’d already asked Mordecai to explain it to me, and his answer had already popped up. As I read it, Commander Stockade started bawling again about his dead friend, Luke.

Mordecai: *Summon Ally* is a rare, multi-functional teleport spell. At its most basic, it does what it says. It summons an ally to you. However, it’s not meant as an offensive spell, and there are some protections in place to keep it from being used as such. At all levels, it puts control in the hands of the summoned and not the summoner. First, you have to be in each other’s chat systems for it to work. I guess the warlord chat works, too. Second, the summoned is given the choice to accept the summoning. Third, the summoned cannot be teleported into a wall or anything like that. What happened in this case is that you were teleported to that castle, but you appeared as a non-corporeal avatar. It was the system compensating for your unconscious state. This is actually intended to stop people from using the spell to remove friends from deadly situations, but in your case, it saved you. You remained in that state until you started to wake up. I thought I’d killed you. It took some time to figure out what was going on.

Carl: What the hell were they trying to do? They went through all this to see a ghost of myself sleeping for like 10 hours. So what? What

happened?

Mordecai: At best, they wanted to ruin your treatment. At worst, they thought it would simply kill you. Or act like teleporting a demon-possessed shell. Remember what happened on the last floor? What happened there, they thought was going to happen here. They wanted to kill us using that crazy spider. The adjutants will explain what actually happened.

Carl: Jesus.

“We must continue,” Panford said to the still-blubbering caterpillar who’d fallen on the floor and was undulating up and down like a toddler having a tantrum.

“Why? Why are you subjecting me to this? Just make your ruling and leave me be.”

Watching the caterpillar blubber at the death of his friend filled me with anger.

You don’t know loss. Not yet.

“We are doing this because it’s part of the rules,” Panford said, exasperation leaking into his formal voice. “All fouls that come with sanctions must be thoroughly examined by a minor quorum. Now kindly shut up and let me finish.”

Stockade grunted and remained prone on the floor.

Panford nodded. The screen showed me teleporting to the ballroom. A translucent version of me appeared in both locations. The side in the infirmary showed Imani starting to shout with Mordecai and everyone else leaning over me, trying to figure out what was happening.

“Carl was teleported to the ballroom here after Shi Maria accepted the invite. However, they intended for him to fully teleport to the location and leave Shi Maria there at the base for the Princess Posse. The spider would’ve then slaughtered the entire room. What happened instead was that Carl was only partially teleported here, thwarting the plan.”

“Incidentally,” Victory said, interrupting. “That wouldn’t have worked under any circumstances.”

“I’m not so certain,” Opiee the bune said. “Carl should be able to teleport normally. But fully teleporting while incapacitated with a presence that’s actively trying to escape? I think it might’ve worked if they’d used a different method to teleport. We all saw what happened next. It was an interesting theory and was worth the risk.”

“Hmm,” Victory said. “The next part wouldn’t have happened without the game guide’s intervention. But perhaps you’re correct.”

Panford waved at his fellow adjutants to let him continue. “It’s irrelevant. Even if it would’ve worked, there was additional corruption in the procedure when crawlers Katia and Carl touched hands during the start of the process. Carl’s consciousness remained inside of Katia’s while Carl’s avatar temporarily existed in both bases.”

“The consciousness jumping like that is still a mystery,” Opiee said. “It’s fascinating, and it shouldn’t have happened.”

“I believe it’s the communal nature of his Primal race,” Victory replied. “But it could also be the duality of the Shi Maria presence. She, in turn, has a god within herself.”

At the table, Architect Houston leaned forward to examine the screen as it switched to a new view.

The screen now showed a much hazier scene, showing nothing but blurry shadows. I recognized it immediately. *Holy shit*, I thought. *They can see our dreams*. It was the first part of Katia’s nightmare. Katia and I stood in the hallway, our arms physically attached as we watched a memory of herself walk through a door into a building. She stopped dead as another man was walking out.

What are you doing here? Dream Katia had asked him in Icelandic. I could understand it perfectly.

Telling them the truth the man said, pushing past her. On the screen, the words came out garbled, like a radio tuned just south of the correct station. But I could hear it. I could hear the panic in Katia’s voice. The venom in the man’s. His name was Fannar. He was a fellow professor, and they were originally going to adopt together. He’d slept with a student, and she’d reported him. Nothing had come of it other than the ruination of Katia’s life.

The scene jumped.

I can take a test, Katia pleaded to the faceless woman. *I haven’t touched anything in ten years. It was so long ago.*

It’s not just that. You’re sick, and you’ve been hiding it. With Annie’s medical needs, and with so little time left, we don’t feel...

He had no right, Katia shouted. She screamed the words, and she swept everything off the woman’s desk. Even garbled like this, they stung me all over again. The now Katia, the one watching this with me, had cried on my shoulder. *He had no right*, she’d said in unison with the ghost on the screen.

The now version of Katia also had a crow on her shoulder. Her card that she'd brought from the previous floor. A crow with the skull of an infant.

The crow's name was also Annie. I didn't know what that meant, but it seemed important.

Across the way, Architect Houston moved his attention from the screen and to me.

"Turn this off," I said. "This isn't yours to watch."

I was ignored. The scene changed. We were in a hospital room, Katia standing at a crib, holding the baby the best she could. It was difficult with all the wires and diodes that attached to the nine-month-old, who'd just started standing on her own in the crib.

The now Katia and I both gasped and stepped back as a massive spider appeared, pushing herself into the room. Annie the crow cawed angrily and flapped her wings. She, too, was attached to Katia, blended into her shoulder.

This spider was Shi Maria. And soon, a second spider appeared. Hapanzi. Her husband. He didn't say the name out loud, and here in this place, we didn't have names floating over our heads, but in the dream, I knew. I knew everything about him, memories that were just now starting to flow back into me.

Too many memories. Memories that diluted and washed away into the stream.

"Worry not, my children," the male spider had said. As we watched, he transformed into a large, dark-skinned human, wearing simple pants and a vest. His accent was like that of Asojano's. I recognized the voice as the same one that occasionally spoke in my mind. "Worry not."

Only then did the scene fade, returning to me on the floor of the ballroom, still translucent and flickering.

Panford continued. "After some time, the Shi Maria consciousness was also pulled into Katia's dreamscape. Meanwhile, parties at both ends scrambled to find a way to turn Carl's incapacitation to their advantage. You, Stockade, planned on casting a spell to force Carl to completely form on your side, but you paused. You paused because you once again received outside information about how the Princess Posse team was planning to react. You, once again, needed to time your reaction to just the correct moment. Meanwhile, members of the crawler team became aware of exactly what was happening, and they formed a plan to defend Carl."

“So, they’re cheating also!” the caterpillar shouted, suddenly pulling himself straight up. “They also have someone watching from the outside!”

“I will refute this,” Victory said. The simple pronouncement was followed by a *ping* from the system.

“You idiot,” Panford said to the caterpillar. “I will note for the record that Commander Stockade of the Lemig Sortion has admitted his guilt.”

Yet another ping filled the room.

Prepotente: Hello, Carl and Donut.

Donut: HI PREPOTENTE! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? WHY HAVEN’T YOU JOINED MY ARMY YET?

Carl: I’m a little busy here. Gonna need like ten minutes.

Prepotente: I fear you don’t have ten minutes. I am near the southern border with the Naga, surveying your defenses, and there is a great amount of enemy movement. They are attempting to be surreptitious about it, but Bianca and I are observing them from high above. The long-range trebuchets of the elves are preparing to fire, and there is an entire squad of about 100 mercenaries with colors for the Madness who think they’re invisible, preparing to rush your trenches. There are multiple armored, tracked vehicles under camouflage netting as well.

Donut: YOU BETTER GET SOMEWHERE SAFE FAST.

Prepotente: With no magic being allowed in the beginning, I believe I am quite safe, thank you. Once the festivities begin, I have a very specific score to settle with the lead producer of the *Blood Hunter* program, and after that is complete, only then will I come to your aid and join in your military. If you’re still alive.

A new chat came before I could figure out what the hell he was talking about.

Elle: Guys. Shit’s happening on the Naga side. Lots of movement.

Florin: Team. Movement on the northern front. Enemy is moving like they’re preparing a push

Donut: WHAT IS GOING ON? WE STILL HAVE ALMOST 20 HOURS IN THE CEASEFIRE.

Florin: I know, but something’s up. All teams, positions now.

Carl: Pony says the same.

Imani: Nobody is in place. We’re not done with the defenses yet!

Li Jun: The Shanty Town defenses are still being built. Have two towers built, but that's it. Both splash towers. We are working as fast as we can.

Li Na: We should have two more active in the next twenty minutes.

Li Jun: Also, uh Florin. You wanted to know about Lucia Mar, right? She's here in Shanty Town right now with her dog, drinking at the Possum Envy right on the edge of the border with the robot team. The Reavers. One of the new guys tried to recruit her, and she almost ripped his head off.

Florin: Thanks for the head's up, mate.

Elle: They're pulling a bunch of camo netting off some tank things on the Naga side!

Carl: Shit. Everyone. Let's go. Code red. Man your lines. I don't know what's happening, and it could be a drill, but I think shit's about to go down. Remember the plan. Louis. Are you ready?

Louis: We only have half your bombs installed! We're not ready!

Carl: Don't have a choice. Get that thing into the air ASAP.

“CARL,” PANFORD SAID, BRINGING ME BACK TO THE PRESENT. “I WOULD appreciate you pay attention to the proceedings.”

I grunted and nodded as my chat system exploded with even more messages. I needed to stall for time to see if and how all of this was connected. “I guess I’m still confused about everything that happened up to this point. Can you explain it to me like I’m a toddler?”

Victory sighed and then spoke. “When you tried to expel the Shi Maria presence, Stockade was using an outside-the-dungeon partner to watch the procedure. He timed it precisely so you received a teleport request right at the moment when Shi Maria was able to accept it. Because he’s an idiot, it only half worked, and the system split you in two. Because you were in two places, both sides then attempted to fully drag you into their presence. But at this point, Mordecai became aware of what was really happening and knew he was being watched and formulated a subterfuge. Now shut up and allow Panford to explain what happened next.”

Panford gestured at the screen, which now showed Mordecai and Rosetta talking. “I’m going to pull him out,” Mordecai said on the screen. “I’m going to use a *Shock Wake* salve, but I gotta adjust it to work on a non-corporeal form.”

The screen showed Mordecai feverishly working over his alchemist’s table. On the other side of the split, it presented Commander Stockade preparing to cast a spell, his eyes once again flashing.

“While Mordecai brewed his potion, Stockade prepared a counter move, one to fully drag Carl into the ballroom. If the spell and the salve were applied simultaneously, Carl would’ve likely died, his soul being ripped in two. But Mordecai, aware that he was being illegally observed, was actually creating a different potion. Not a wake-up salve like he claimed out loud, but something to violently expel the Shi Maria presence. It was a risky move.”

“How,” Stockade asked. “How would they know, if they weren’t also observing us?”

“That’s a question you can answer for yourself. If they weren’t cheating, then how would they know?” Panford asked.

Stockade hissed. “A spy! There’s a spy in my midst!”

I actually had no idea how we’d known what was happening. We didn’t have any spies, as far as I was aware, here in the castle of the Lemigs. Elle and her squad were watching the Nagas. Our other changelings were moving through the Operatic side, disarming traps. Our last scouts were all with Louis on the *Party Planner*, which we’d planned on already having in enemy territory the moment the ceasefire ended.

I took a breath as realization hit me. We didn’t have spies. Juice Box’s team did. She’d said they’d all been expelled from the courts of the warlords. That was obviously untrue.

She was waiting for the ceasefire to end, I realized. She was going to assassinate some of the leaders once this started. Kill a leader, and the team would automatically lose. She played her hand early to save me.

The scene changed, showing Mordecai applying the salve to my translucent chest. I buckled, as if in pain. At the same time, Stockade cackled with laughter as he cast his spell.

The cackling stopped a few moments later.

The split screen turned to a full view of the ballroom with me on the floor, convulsing, fully corporeal. And then, just like that, I turned. There was no moment of transformation, like when Katia and Juice Box changed forms. There was a blink, and then I was Shi Maria.

“I have always loved you,” Shi Maria roared, her voice muffled. All the guards in the room panicked and started to run as the spider lashed, her front two arms slashing across the room. Lemig goblins separated from their bodies as the giant spider rampaged through the room, screaming and confused.

I also saw something the others didn't. Her jaws were still unhinged. She was still in the midst of swallowing the human version of her husband. In the dream, we'd watched her devour the man, all the while screaming that she loved him and would never hurt him. As I watched the memory from the ballroom, the leg in her mouth vanished, and her jaw snapped back into place.

"I didn't kill you, Hapanzi!" Maria screamed. "I would never kill you!" She skewered a goblin through the chest and picked him up with her arm. She shrieked at the goblin, her voice panicked and unhinged. "I would never hurt him! How dare you? How dare you!" She ripped the goblin in two.

I knew at that exact moment, in the dream, Shi Maria had disappeared and her husband—Hapanzi—had reappeared in front of us, once again as a spider. He told me that she was gone, trapped in my own body. He told me that I would now have control over the eye and the containment she was within. I could summon her again at will, if I wanted. But I could only do it once, and if I did so, she could choose. She could choose to take over my body or expel herself back into her own form.

In other words, Shi Maria had become yet another bomb in my inventory. An especially dangerous bomb.

I had an uneasy feeling as I watched the replay. She didn't look nearly as trapped as Hapanzi said. Still, I now had control of the eye on my chest. I could feel it there, clenched closed.

In the dream, she had returned before I'd awakened. We'd left her in the room with Annie.

On the screen, it showed Luke throwing himself in front of the cowering Commander Stockade. Shi Maria slashed his legs off, and Luke collapsed to the floor.

Her eye was open, on the screen. The caterpillar's compound eyes lit up once again as they shone with the prismatic light. All around, the surviving goblins started beating the shit out of each other, all possessed by the spider's insanity. They shot, stabbed, and bit. A soldier walked up to Luke, who continued to drag himself across the room, moving toward the exit, and he stabbed the legless goblin in the back with a long, segmented blade. He pulled the blade out, took two steps, and then he pulled it across his own throat.

A moment passed, and Shi Maria fell in on herself, rolled onto her back, her long, terrifying legs all jumbled, and then there was a blink, and I was there, standing upright in the room, my eyes closed. A silhouette of the spider remained, but it was made of the blood that had been coating her body, and it fell right over me like I'd had a bucket dumped on my head. The scene ended with me gasping and opening my eyes.

"Another oddity," Opiee said. "Mordecai's potion only worked temporarily. It should have permanently severed the bond, but in the end, the spider was pulled back into Carl. Much is happening at once within that crawler's body, and I am quite curious to learn what, exactly, happened in this case."

"I... I loved him," Commander Stockade continued to say. His little hands moved back and forth, and I realized he was slowly pulling his own fur out. There was a ring of it on the floor under him. "I can't bear this."

Elle: Okay cowboys, I'm in position. But if this is just a drill, I'll get caught and booted from their territory. Am I risking it or not?

Florin: Carl?

Carl: Gotta do it.

Elle: Okay. Moving in.

The screen disappeared with a flash. Panford straightened. "We believe that Stockade and Houston both conspired to use the secured messaging system to speak with someone upon the 18th floor, who is relaying real-time information via a third party participating in the Celestial Ascendency. Since celestial messaging is secured, we do not know who the middleman is in this scenario, but we have identified the party on the 18th floor as Nurse Yugoslav of the Madness."

I planted a fake grin and turned to Architect Houston. "Your mom? Your mom is here in the dungeon? I can't wait to meet her."

I sent a quick message to Juice Box.

Opiee rose in the air, his little wings fluttering. These bune things usually walked on the ground, but they could fly short distances. "Houston's presence here in the castle and the possible collusion by a family member, who is not bound by any such rules, is circumstantial evidence. Quite damning circumstantial evidence at that..." He paused for dramatic effect. "...but I don't feel it's enough to officially charge him. Unless you want to confess." The small dragon turned to his warlord, who

was still looking directly at me. “Do you wish to confess, Architect Houston?”

The masked creature made no moves and said nothing.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Opiee said.

“Oh, come on!” I said.

Juice Box: I passed on your message to Ferdinand. I’m hearing some information about strange movements, by the way. I am relaying it all to Louis and Britney. I had to burn some assets to save your ass. I hope it was worth it. Head’s up to your people. We’re going to power up the towers early. If someone is in town and isn’t in your army, they should probably start moving into your territory.

“Baroness?” Opiee asked.

Victory shrugged. “Houston is obviously guilty, but unless he admits it, he was smart enough to let Stockade do all of his dirty work. I will vote not culpable for both the Madness team and the Princess Posse.”

“Agreed,” Opiee said.

There was a ping.

“Very well,” Panford said. “Because the other two adjutants are in agreement, I do not need to render a ruling. This minor quorum finds the Madness and the Princess Posse not guilty of any wrongdoing. We also find that the leader of the Democratic Sortion has admitted guilt to illegal information gathering, and we are ready to render penalties.

Warlord Message. Sir Ferdinand of Team Retribution has proposed an emergency action item. “Because them alien cunts on other floors are being little bitches and cheating, we propose that nobody in the dungeon, including those pricks partying it up in that centipede’s asshole, be allowed to watch any outside feeds for the remainder of this little game.”

This action item has been approved. Effective immediately, everyone within the dungeon is subjected to an immediate, live-feed blackout.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. That was fast. I hadn’t wanted to waste any of our own action items on this, but I was glad it had worked.

“That’s a first,” Victory muttered.

“It’s about time,” Panford said.

“Luke. Oh gods, Luke,” Stockade said again.

I was finally starting to realize that the warlord was actually getting worse, not better as time moved forward. I remembered that moment from the video, when he looked right into my eye.

I shook my head. Not *my* eye. Shi Maria's eye.

I received a new direct message in the warlord chat.

Architect Houston: If you ever mention my mother out loud ever again, you and that animal companion of yours will spend the last thousand hours of your existence upon the amplification table in my surgical theater. This is a promise.

Warlord Carl: Oh, fuck off.

Architect Houston: You are in mortal danger at this very moment, and you don't even realize it. I do hope you escape so we can extend our play, but gracious pet owners accept the gifts their animals drop at their doorsteps.

Warlord Carl: What the fuck does that even mean?

"As for penalties," Panford said. "Since this is the first of three allowed penalties, you will receive a 25% reduction in your standing force. In addition... Wait, what are you doing?"

The caterpillar had fallen to the floor and was openly sobbing now. He was literally rubbing his face against the floor. He started to scream. "Luke! Luke! Luke!"

A stream of blood spread across the wood floor, like he'd caught his face on a nail. He didn't stop. With every sweep of his fuzzy face, there was a new tearing noise and more blood on the floor. A health bar appeared and started to rapidly lower.

"Uh," I said after a moment. Nobody moved to help him. "Not that I'm complaining, but are we going to just watch him do that to himself?"

"Beautiful, beautiful Luke. I loved your zomp-hued thighs! Oh Luke! Oh Luke!"

"We can't interfere, nor can we call his guards in here," Panford said after a moment.

The caterpillar started smashing his face up and down against the floor. A little splash of gooey blood appeared each time.

Smack, smack, smack.

"Luke," the caterpillar groaned, his words barely discernible.

"A bit of a delayed reaction, but I think he got a full dose of that spider's *Insanity* spell," Victory said. She turned to Architect Houston.

“Feel free to help him. Or call his guards.”

The warlord from the Madness did not move. He continued to stare directly at me.

Smack. Smack. They were coming slower now.

“Panford,” Victory said. “Let’s end this now. If we stay for much longer we’ll have to deal with a new adjudication.”

A wave of coldness washed over me.

“Wait,” I said. “What happens when this is done? How do I get back?”

Smack...

Smack.

“Because the ceasefire is in effect and because of the nature of your transport here, you’ll be teleported back to your base,” Panford said.

“Shit, okay,” I said quickly. “End it!”

I saw Victory’s eyes suddenly get huge as if she just realized something as well. She took a breath and then said, “Yes, Panford. Finish the ruling.”

The dreadnaught couldn’t take his eyes off the caterpillar, who’d stopped screaming. A yellow goo oozed from his head, mixed with the red, watery blood.

All sense of formality left his voice. “Uh, 25% reduction in force and removal of two tech slots. As those are currently filled with mechanized armor, both units will be immediately disbanded. This is our ruling, and this inquiry is concluded.”

There was a ping.

Victory looked at me, and she said, “I will now transport Carl back to his base. Teleporting in 20 seconds.”

Commander Stockade groaned, and then, just like that, he died, having literally smashed his own brains out against the floor.

System Message: Commander Stockade of the Democratic Sortion has fallen. Credit for the kill has been ruled as a psychosis-induced suicide.

System Message: The Democratic Sortion has been defeated. As this defeat was voluntary, the closest ally castle or warlord to their headquarters will receive all their assets.

System Message: All assets of the Lemig Sortion have been awarded to the Madness.

There was a pause. I felt the tingle of pre-teleportation.

System Message: Due to Ceasefire rule three, subsection six of the ceasefire addendum, the voluntary withdrawal of a combatant squad has engaged acceleration scenario two. The ceasefire will be shortened by 23.33 hours.

System Message: The Ceasefire has ended.

System Message: All unaffiliated crawlers have been teleported from Larracos.

Warlord Message: Phase One Combat rules have engaged. You may freely enter enemy territory via designated corridors. No offensive magic may be used during this first ramp-up phase. No combatants may cast teleport-based spells.

Across from me, Architect Houston jumped to his feet, and his robes flung back, revealing a horrific, bug-like body and six arms, two of which were holding a rifle, which he brought to bear upon my chest. He fired as I dove out of the way. I landed heavily against the counter. I grabbed the bag of cat food just as I dropped an impact hob-lobber onto the ground.

Teleporting Now.

Entering the Princess Posse camp.

I landed heavily on the floor of the now-empty field hospital. My head smashed against the cot as I crashed to the rocky floor. I dropped the bag of cat food, and it spilled across the ground, the little, brown pebbles going everywhere. I gasped in pain at the hole punched right through my shoulder. I slammed a healing potion, and I cried in new pain as my body knit itself.

He'd almost gotten me. I'd dropped the bomb, but if I'd gotten him, I'd have received a message.

I should've dropped a bigger bomb, I thought. I'd gone with my hotlist.

He'd planned this. All of this. Either that, or he'd known what was happening to Stockade and had compensated accordingly. He'd willingly sacrificed another living, breathing world leader to get to me.

And it had almost worked.

I gasped in pain again as I sat up, little cat food pebbles spilling all around me. A group of sluggalos slithered into the room.

"What're you sitting around for?" the lead one asked. He was a level 55 named Jason Manning FUCKS. He had dreadlocks shaped like little morning stars. He waved his head back and forth, and the tiny weapons spun in a circle. "Ain't you heard? We got a war on. Everyone is moving to one of the two fronts. Now quit your bleeding and get out there." The slug

whooped loudly and left the room, trailing orange slime as his compatriots followed.

A moment later, an explosion echoed as a non-magical rock detonated against our shield.

System Message: Weapons Free. Weapons Free. Faction Wars have officially begun.

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CHRISTMAS MORNING

“Hey, do you know if he ever made it into the dungeon? That Paulie guy, I mean?”

“No,” Orren said. “He appears to have been outside, but he never made it within. Most of them never make it in. Like with all collective minds and swarms, the individual parts are often disposable. Remember that in any future dealings with their kind.”

Containment Interface is now available for use. A new tab is available in your interface.

“Actually,” I said. “I changed my mind. There was this gas station I paused at on my way north. The one with the memory ghost dog. Can you send me there? I just want to say hi to that dog again before I jump back into it.”

“Very well. Good day, Carl.”

With that, he disappeared, leaving me alone in the room. I’d transfer in a few seconds.

The coffee from the shelter remained heavy on my tongue. The scent of the shelter’s breakfast mixed with the Lysol remained in my memory, and my stomach rumbled. But all I could think about was that lonely dog, left alone to guard an empty gas station on Christmas day.

Transferring Now.

I blinked, and I appeared outside the gas station.

There was nothing special about the old, lonely dog. Lightning Lou. We’d just spent half an hour negotiating for all the stuff I could and couldn’t have in exchange for Paulie’s worthless, plastic tub. The whole

time I kept thinking, *what difference does this make? What difference does any of it make?*

But, still, despite allowing the interface to be installed, I couldn't help but think it would be a mistake. Paulie's warning had gotten to me. Were we worth it? Were we worth saving? Or better yet, were we worth sacrificing?

I moved into the gas station, going in through the broken door. I grabbed a bag of chips off the rack and a soda from the cooler, and I sat next to the memory ghost of the sleeping dog. He snored softly, occasionally shifting.

I could end it all right now.

A person shouldn't have this much power.

It was too much.

There was too much weight there, on my shoulders.

It was too much.

You will not break me.

I wiped my eyes, and I pulled up my interface.

I blinked. The way Paulie had described it, I was expecting there to be a single button that basically said "Boom." I could press it, and it would be done. That was not this at all. It was six tabs of information, similar to my portal analysis tool. Each of the tabs had a dozen submenus. There were multiple pages, all filled with numbers I couldn't possibly understand.

The language was strange. I could read the words. I could understand the numbers, but it clearly wasn't Syndicate standard. There was a fractional moment before it translated, which wasn't something I'd seen before. Was this the Valtay home language? Whatever Paulie's language was? I clicked through, trying to figure it all out.

From what I gathered, this interface didn't control the AI. Instead, it controlled the device they used to install the AI into the primal engine. After the AI was installed, the device remained physically nearby, wherever that was, but the device no longer had any direct influence over the AI itself.

Still, I had sense it kept a metaphorical eye on the AI and the computer it now called home. It had metrics such as physical location, temperature, and several other things I didn't understand. None of the numbers seemed to be changing, other than to fluctuate back and forth between two digits.

I took screenshots of all the menus.

There was a page that showed an animated, top-down view of the solar system. There was a blinking light over Earth. The headline read **Primary**

Zone Influence. We already knew that. I kept looking.

It took me about ten minutes of searching to find the Fuse page. It listed the five benchmarks required for the fuse to blow, but it didn't really say what the benchmarks were. Only two of the five were marked as **Conditions Met.**

And there it was. The button. **Override Conditions And Activate Fuse. Warning. Warning.**

I could press it, and if it actually worked, this would all be over.

I thought of the others, all still at the guild. They'd had their Christmas party. They'd spent it with friends. With family. That was so much better than dying alone, one by one, screaming in a pool of their own blood. It would be a punch to the gut to the Syndicate, that's for sure. I thought of the legions of bastards who'd descended on the planet. How long would it be before they could do this again to someone else? How many of them would I kill?

Still, I paused. I thought of Donut. I thought of the people on the surface. Of all my friends. What right did I have to make this decision for them?

So, if I didn't press the button, what could I do with this? Could I use it for leverage? Could I treat it like I was a guy with a gun to a hostage's temple? No. There was no way I'd be fast enough. The moment someone learned I had this, I was dead.

Could I set up some sort of dead man's trigger? They'd probably find a way around it. And what would be the point? The fact I even had this power might be enough to cause them to trigger the failsafe on their own.

Then, what could I do? Should I just pretend like I didn't have it, and only bring it out if needed? What would be the point of that? I could literally die at any moment, and this would all be lost. This was too much power on my shoulders. It was like a physical weight. I had to either make a decision right now, or I needed to decide to not use this power at all.

The button was right there. One mental push.

Do you remember the circus? That was fun, wasn't it?

Would the AI even let this happen?

That thought was like a splash of cold water.

The AI's role in all this bothered me. I wasn't going to pretend to understand anything about its true origins or its thought processes or all that

bullshit. But I didn't believe for a second that thing really wanted to die. It wasn't in pain like Paulie said. It was having fun.

The more I thought about this, the more that gave me pause. It didn't make sense. How could it possibly have allowed me this power if it *didn't* want to die?

That was it, wasn't it? It had to be a trap. Or a test. I'd click the button, and nothing would happen.

Or I'd die.

Or the solar system would literally get destroyed.

Would I even get the chance to know what happened?

Goddamn it.

Carl: Donut, are you doing okay?

Donut: WHEN ARE YOU COMING BACK? I MISS YOU.

Goddamn it.

I didn't know what I wanted to do.

But that wasn't true, was it? I *did* want to hit the button. I wanted it more than anything in the world. My anger at the powers that made this happen were bright. So bright.

I miss you, too, Donut.

...

But not bright enough.

I clicked away from the screen, and I spent some time just breathing. I opened it back up. I started looking through the rest of the menus, trying to see what else was in there.

And there, just as I was about to say my goodbyes to the dog and get back out there, I saw it. It was an option at the very end of a list of twenty status notifications.

Disconnect Containment. Warning. This will disengage all metrics and controls, including the fuse system. It will render the Containment Unit inert. The failsafe will no longer function. Most controls will cease to function.

Oh, thank god. Thank god.

I almost slammed the button down right at that moment, just to get the weight off. But right before I pressed it, I paused yet again.

It was literally the only other button in here I could press.

I thought again about Paulie's warning, and now I wondered which of those two options he was really warning me about.

Goddamnit, I thought. This was a trap, too, wasn't it? I actually had three options, assuming the buttons did what they claimed. I could do nothing. I could press the fuse and die. Or I could relieve myself of the burden and press the button to turn it all off. But if I turned it off, did that mean I would be "freeing" the AI? What did that mean? What did that look like?

Who set this trap? Was it Paulie's people? He said they couldn't even access this menu, so did they really know what was in here? Did the Pacifist Network know? *Somebody* built this menu.

Which of those three options would hurt the Syndicate the most? And which of those three options would protect my people the most?

When I framed it that way, the decision was suddenly quite easy.

Carl: Donut, I'll be back soon.

We already were under the thumb of the psychotic AI.

I pressed the **Disconnect Containment** button. The entire new interface blanked out, leaving nothing but the map. Already, the little red dot over Earth started to grow.

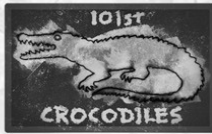
"Welcome to the party, pals," I said.

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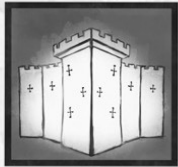
[PART 2]
THE RAMP-UP

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BATTALIONS



101ST CROCODILES
CDR: GENERAL FLORIN



102ND BULWARK BATTALION
CDR: GENERAL TRAN



103RD RECON LEGIONNAIRES
CDR: COLONEL BODI



104TH NAUGHTY LITTLE PIGGIES
CDR: COLONEL TIPID



105TH SCREAM WARRIORS
CDR: COLONEL JURGEN



106TH BLOODY LEECHES
CDR: COLONEL BOOMER



107TH WHITE DRAGON URBAN DEF.
CDR: GENERAL LI NA



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<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER JUSTICE LIGHT, EIGHTH EDITION.>

I think about him all the time. I have killed many NPCs since I arrived in this horror, but I have only killed one out of anger. He did not deserve that, and it haunts me. I keep going over it. It's the manifestation of how I've changed, all boiled down to a single incident. The old me wouldn't have done that. Snapped and just killed someone.

The memory is abhorrent to me. I have become what I hate.

At this point, the only thing that calms my nerves is the hope that my trap ideas and plans within this scroll will help someone else. It is all I have.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea, 22nd Edition.>

Justice Light. I do not know if you survived this, and if you did, I doubt you will ever have the chance to see these words. But if you're out there, I hope you're watching. Your traps have saved my life more times than I can count. I am working on a big one, based on your seeking flechette design.

Listen to me, brother. We all make mistakes. We sometimes hurt those we haven't intended to hurt. These are the tides of life, the ebbs and flows, and it is unavoidable. But in this case... it was not your fault. No. They put you here. I remember your passage about how you would hunt and give food to the flightless elders of your world. You were once a good, gentle soul. They turned you into a warrior. They are the engineers of this all.

We both know there's no going back, so take comfort in the words of our brother Ikicha from the 11th edition. "The burning Yenks need only to embrace their enemies."

Don't shy from what you've become. Force them to look upon you. Force them to see what they wrought, what they forged in the fires of their own creation.

Let them know fear.

Time remaining in Phase One: 180 hours.

Current Battle Rules:

- **No Offensive Magic Allowed.**
- **No Teleport-based Magic or Skills Allowed.**
- **One may only enter enemy territory via a designated Corridor. Free passage once inside. This restriction does not apply to those with the "Scout" endorsement.**

9 of 10 Teams Remain:

The Bone Clan in Spot 1
The Operatic Collective in Spot 2
The Princess Posse in Spot 3
The Blood Sultanate in Spot 4
The Prism Kingdom in Spot 5
The Dream in Spot 6
The Madness in Spots 7 and 8
The Reavers in Spot 9
Team Retribution defending Larracos.

Eliminated:

The Democratic Sortion

I stepped from the hospital tent to find the base in chaos. Everyone was running to and fro, like an upset ant colony. A few of the colonels were

organizing groups. Most would head north to hold off the largest contingent of enemy forces, gathered on the border with the Operatic Collective. The border was a good ten miles away. A smaller group were headed south to the border with the Naga, an equal distance.

“Hey,” I shouted at a colonel. It was Jurgen, the large barbarian. His battalion had been designated the 105th Scream Warriors. Their logo was a drawing of a screaming girl who looked suspiciously like the mascot for the Wendy’s restaurant chain wearing a Viking helmet with only one horn. “Make sure you leave at least two transports for me.”

“You live!” Jurgen shouted back, and he flashed a pair of heavy metal-style devil horns before shouting over his shoulder, “Heidi, do you see? Carl lives!” He turned and started shouting more orders, making certain two of the transports were sectioned off for my use.

Dozens of messages poured in through the warlord system. I scanned for one in particular.

Your Throne has been locked in place. The location of all the Throne Rooms are now visible on the map.

Carl: Justice, did you get the throne room prepared before it got locked in place?

Justice Light: It is done.

I breathed in relief. I’d only met with the stoic skyfowl once since they’d gotten here. He was the third, and the last I believed, of the cookbook authors who had come with the mercenaries. He didn’t acknowledge me any more than the others when we first met except for a slight bow, one that lasted a little too long. Long enough that Mordecai had spent a contemplative moment looking back and forth between me and the eagle creature.

Justice Light looked much different than any skyfowl I’d seen before. I knew there were all kinds of these things. The one-winged eagle was shorter and stockier than most. His feathers were all black, tinged with gray, and a twin tuft of feathers upon his head gave the impression he had horns, making him look strangely like he was related to Big Tina—who remained in the FUPA for now.

Justice along with a surprisingly large assortment of sluggalos were all working together on a special project, something he’d been planning for a long time, and we let him be. He said he liked the sluggalos because they

didn't seem to mind the idea of accidentally tripping traps and getting themselves skewered.

His class title was strange. He was an **Origamist**, and I had no idea what the hell that even meant. I knew he wasn't yet done with his preparations, but at least he got the throne room set. I glanced at the map and zoomed out. Sure enough, all the faction throne rooms were pretty much where Juice Box's map said they'd be. I focused on the Naga dot, just south of us.

Bam! I ducked as a rock smashed against our shield. For this first part, the projectiles would be ineffective against our defenses. But they were already zeroed in on us. We needed to take out their batteries before the 180 hours were up because when that happened, their rocks would be enchanted with devastating spells.

"Carl, Carl, are you okay?" Donut cried, coming from inside the stronghold, followed closely by three of the cretins—Bomo, Sledge, and Very Sullen—and a smattering of others, including a few of the were-casters, Jamal the shark, a few of the former crawlers, and two strippers. Dong Quixote and Splash Zone. All were members of our new "Personal Guard" and were placed in a platoon, which was similar to a party. That was a setting in the warlord menu, and we got a total of 15 guards just like everyone else, despite there being two warlords. The assigned guards all received a 25% bonus to their constitution as long as they were physically close to one of us. I told Donut that she could choose the platoon herself, which she'd done happily.

Mongo also rushed out with her, jumping up and down and screeching. I had Rend in his pet carrier.

Donut skidded to a stop in front of me. "What did you do? Why did we start early? How did that caterpillar guy die? Goodness, why are you covered in blood?"

"He killed himself," I said. "The blood isn't mine. Not most of it. Long story. Where's Katia?"

Donut hopped and landed heavily on my shoulder. She had her new tiara upon her head, and it glittered brilliantly in the light. She was shaking with excitement.

"She went north already, meeting up with Florin at the front." She sniffed. "Why do you smell like Ferdinand? Is he here? Did you see the emergency action item he made?"

Donut still smelled vaguely like skunk, but I wasn't about to tell her that. More rocks hit the barrier. Flames burst around the half circle shield that encompassed the grounds of the FUPA. Thick smoke started to billow. Poison. The projectile hadn't been magical, but they'd still figured out how to use chemical warfare against us. We'd anticipated this, and several mages stood by, casting spells to dissipate the clouds.

"I found some of his old cat food in the elf castle."

I still had dozens of messages coming in by the moment. At the southern front, the troopers were in their trenches, waiting for the enemy push. In the north, they'd already started moving in. Florin was there and was directing the defense. I filtered the messages out unless they were specifically targeted at me. I went over them as I pulled out the Royal Chariot. I eyed the two transports that Jurgen had set aside. They were flatbeds designed to drive quickly over the plains. No weapons or protections at all. If we added too much "stuff" to the vehicles, the warlord system counted them as war machines, or "Armor," which was really frustrating because we could only build or buy 10 such vehicles. We could have more, but we'd have to steal them from the enemy. As of this moment, we had all ten spots already taken. One from *Party Planner*, and the rest were Florin's flame spider tanks, which were wholly defensive machines. We had five on the northern front and four in the south.

Louis: We're on our way. Uh, Samantha sneaked her way onto the *Party Planner*, too. She's not a designated scout. What should I do?

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. You were supposed to stay put.

Samantha: I AM DOING MY PART IN THE WAR, CARL. WE'LL BE BACK AS SOON AS WE BLOW SOME STUFF UP, RIGHT GENERAL LOUIS?

Carl: Samantha, we only have a limited amount of scout spaces, and they're all used up. You can't be on the airplane. It will literally tear a Samantha-sized hole in the plane when you hit the border. It would hurt Louis and everybody else on board. You'll crash.

Samantha: THAT'S OKAY. LOUIS AND I WILL CRASH TOGETHER, AND HE WILL PARACHUTE DOWN INTO THE WOODS WITH ME WHERE WE CAN BUILD A LOG CABIN, AND HE CAN GROW A BEARD. ONE THAT'S ALL SCRAGGLY AND KINDA ITCHY BUT IT ALSO SMELLS LIKE A CAMPFIRE. I'M SORRY IF THAT MAKES YOU JEALOUS, CARL.

Louis: What?

Carl: Louis, you gotta dump her out the bomb bay. Samantha, you can roll back to base.

Samantha: NO, WAIT. LOUIS CAN JUST COME BACK. IT'S A SUICIDE MISSION, AND I LIKE LOUIS. I LIKE HIM MORE THAN CHARLIE. I DON'T WANT HIM TO DIE YET.

I took a breath. Louis's mission *was* dangerous, and Samantha wasn't as stupid as she was pretending. She'd sneaked aboard on purpose in order to "save" him. That wasn't good.

Carl: Louis. Out the bomb bay.

Louis: I'm on it.

I moved to the chat with Elle.

Elle: Holy cannoli, guys. These bald elf pricks have all sorts of hardware out here. They have the giant artillery trebuchets, but they also have a ton of smaller ones that they just pulled out of their inventories and set up. Why are they allowed to have so many of these things when we can't? The soldiers and their mercenaries are all mounted on zebra-looking things, too, like they're going to retreat or charge at any minute. I think the rocks they're throwing are cover for something else.

Carl: We're on our way to the southern front right now. Keep your head down and don't get caught, and we'll be there soon.

Elle: Doing my best.

We didn't have a good fast travel option to the southern front yet, so we were gonna have to take our vehicles. It was ten miles over gently rolling plains. By the time we'd reach the southern border, the ground would be mostly flat. The Harley Davidson was a road bike and wasn't great for this, and I decided to use the chariot for now.

Next to me, Jamal rolled up. We hadn't yet replaced his harness and spider legs. Katia had been planning on doing it after her treatment. The hammerhead shark flopped around with excitement. I sighed and sent a quick message to Mordecai.

Jamal did another excited hop, causing Dong Quixote and Holger the were-castor to jump out of the way. "Oh yes, this excitement level I have is something else. Miss Katia says she will make Jamal's new hoppers soon. Mayhaps when Jamal gets back from the fighting? I must admit, it is giving

me untold levels of energy.” He did yet another barrel roll, sending rocks flying.

“Dong, Holger, ride with me. Donut, ride Mongo. Everyone else, grab a transport. We have about ten miles to go, and we gotta get there fast.” I patted the large, quivering shark on the head. “Jamal. Sorry, buddy. You’re staying here. Katia is busy, but Rosetta and Mordecai will help you get your new harness. We’re going to strap something onto you, but we don’t have it yet. We’re going to the trenches right now, and they’re not really designed for you. Stay here with the rest of the defenders in case the bad guys get through. Listen to Tipid. He’s in charge of defending the FUPA.”

“What?” Jamal asked.

“We need you for the last stand,” Donut said. “I’m quite jealous, honestly. I don’t think anyone other than you can do it.”

The shark just looked at the cat. “Jamal feels as if you’re trying to reverse psychologicalize him. It will not work. Jamal is much too quick-witted for such tricks. I was once one of the most feared warriors of all the seas.”

“Well, I tried,” Donut said as she jumped onto Mongo’s back.

The three cretins also grumbled unhappily. They were too heavy for the troop transports, which were basically flatbed trucks. We’d been planning on making some for the larger troops, but it was one of several things that hadn’t happened yet.

“You three. You’re gonna have to walk. Or if you want, you can ask Mordecai and he’ll help you build a heavy duty transport really fast. But I know materials are in short supply, so it might not happen right now.”

“It’s okay, Sledgie,” Donut added. “We’ll make sure you can fight with us later if you miss it. The stupid rules say I can’t use any teleport spells, either, so I can’t even use *Puddle Jumper* right now.” The cretin grumbled again. The fourth cretin—Clay-Ton—was currently at the northern front with Chris. The cretin and the lava rock crawler had formed a strange friendship since we’d assigned Clay-Ton to be Chris’s bodyguard on the Hunting Grounds. The two would just sit next to each other and occasionally grunt at one another. And now they were with Florin in the northern trenches.

“Carl,” Donut said. “Your jacket is glowing again! Goodness, that patch is disgusting.”

“I know,” I said. “I need to keep it turned on for just a little longer. We need the power.”

“Mordecai said not to keep it turned on for long.”

“I’m fine,” I said, ignoring the pang of pain that jolted across my midsection. Or the distant ringing in my ears. The rushing noise just below the surface.

“Wait, wait, we’re coming! We’re coming!” came a small voice. We all turned to see three kids rushing out to greet us. All were wearing metal skull caps and were dragging training spears from inside the guild. It was Randy and Todd, the orphaned ursine bear cubs, and the speaker was a tiny, dwarf-like creature. Clint.

Once upon a time, Clint had been a creature called a chee, living on the dungeon’s sixth floor. According to the story, Scolopendra’s nine-tier attack had turned his entire kindergarten class into a group of shifters called were-castors, which were really just beavers. They spent the next few hundred years growing up, becoming warriors, fighting against the high elves and the Naiad Confederacy. Clint, along with their caretaker, Miss Nadine, had died on the sixth floor. Edgar the tortoise had turned them into tattoos upon Signet. But when they’d turned to tattoos, they’d reverted to their forms from before the nine-tier attack. And when Signet died, both Miss Nadine and Clint had become flesh golems. So now Miss Nadine was a young chee woman, and Clint was a little, kindergarten-aged kid. They’d all come down to this floor with the elf castle.

Holger, one of the other were-castors, had also come down with the elf castle, but he remained an adult. The hairy, mulleted dwarf shifter grunted at the child version of his best friend.

“Clint,” Holger said, coming out of the chariot and going to a knee. “You know you have to stay inside where it’s safe. Miss Nadine is probably looking all over for you.”

“But Miss Nadine is being mean to me,” Clint said. “She says we’re not allowed to play with Tina until we learn to not play rough. She says Randy and Todd should stay away from her because she killed their dad, but she’s different now and Tina’s mom says she’s apologized anyway. And Bonnie and the changelings don’t let us play with them, either. I wanna show Miss Nadine and the changelings we’re tough. We can help you fight the bad guys. That’ll show them.”

“We’ve been practicing,” Randy the ursine said.

“We’re going to bathe in apostate blood,” Todd added, waving his dulled spear. He ended up smacking Jamal with it, who yelped in surprise. “Sorry, Jamal.”

I only half listened to this as I quickly scrolled through more messages. Splash Zone took control of one of the transports and drove it over as the others started piling in. I pulled out the six-pack missile launcher and attempted to affix it to the chariot, but I received an error.

You have used up your allotted Armor options. Vehicle upgrade not allowed.

I cursed. As good as this warlord system was for communication and organization, it really limited us in other aspects.

“You gotta grow up a little more,” Holger was saying, chuckling. “All three of you are still just cubs. You’re gonna get hurt. Clint, you already died once. You’re not going to get another chance after this.”

“Edgar says I might never grow up because I’m a flesh golem now,” Clint said, stamping his little feet. His skull cap fell cockeyed and hit the ground with a thud.

Holger smiled down at the angry child. “There are worse fates, believe me.” He patted him on the head. “No chance of going bald if you stay young. Now, all of you, help Jamal back to the base. And check on the other golems. And make sure Miss Nadine knows you’re safe. You know how worried she gets.”

“Okay,” Clint said, dejected. “Come on, guys. Come on, Jamal.”

“The gods frown upon your blasphemy,” Todd added before the group of them turned back.

“That bear kid freaks me out,” Holger said, sliding next to me in the chariot.

“We all ready?” I asked, looking across the eclectic group. Another pang of pain ripped across my stomach.

You are now suffering from Soul Poisoning. Activate the *Daughter’s Kiss* skill to disperse the effect.

Behind me, Dong Quixote slipped into the empty gunner’s seat. He had his “flail” across his lap. He held the crusty nickel sock up and laughed quietly, whispering something about long-term investments and short-term gains.

I answered myself with a sigh. “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

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THE DREAM'S ARTILLERY STARTED POUNDING OUR DEFENSES AT THE southern front just as we arrived.

We didn't have any physical barriers over the trenches, but we did have literally thousands of mages scattered along the front, all with specialization in protection spells. A constant, unending rumble of explosions and smoke filled the area as we approached. The normally sunny plains had taken on an apocalyptic feel.

Both sides had constant fog spells and protection spells going. The list of active protections for our side was literally three pages long. So far, other than the artillery and occasional bursts of sniper fire, there hadn't yet been a raid on our position that would fully test the defenses.

I knew from Florin that the northern front was another story. They were pushing back wave after wave of mercenaries. So far, the enemy was utilizing their meager supply of unenthusiastic dungeon-born NPCs to test our defenses. It had quickly evolved into a stalemate, a war of non-offensive spells and counterspells.

We had a clear advantage of mages and knowledge, but they had the numbers, and for the next week, they had vastly superior firepower.

Still, despite the quick impasse, I had received reports of casualties on both fronts.

On the southern front, there was someone on the enemy side who'd started spamming a *Fill Hole* spell from afar that suffocated a group of

veterans before we'd enacted countermeasures. An invisible scout—someone from Empress D'Nadia's Prism—had gotten in behind our position and found one of the escape tunnels and had unleashed a powerful *Instant River* scroll that had caused a ton of havoc. A few soldiers had leaped out of the trench as the water poured in, and they were immediately picked off by snipers from the enemy side, despite the heavy fog.

That scout, along with a total of six others, had all been captured or killed so far thanks to our efforts. The scout from the Prism had not been a mercenary, but a Saccathian prince of some kind, one of D'Nadia's actual relatives. Pieces of the saboteur littered the battlefield now, after he stepped upon a simple landmine trap when he attempted to flee.

After that, I sent out orders. If we captured an enemy, and we could keep them alive but unconscious, then we would do so. The NPCs and the mercenaries born outside the dungeon were to be separated. There were spells that could turn the NPCs to our side.

The mercenaries had another purpose.

If any gave us trouble, or if it wasn't feasible or safe to keep them, then my orders were clear. Kill them. Loot them using the safe-looting protocols. Keep the body. Report it to one's superior officer, who would pass the information back to base where a group of those who preferred to stay out of the direct fighting were keeping track of the big picture for us.

I blinked at the wide, glittering expanse of traps twinkling through the fog of the no-man's land between our position and the naga fortifications. Most of our traps remained intact and hidden, thanks to Justice Light's protection spell. It was something he'd figured out a long time ago but it had never grown into practice because it was thought it only worked on alarm traps. Justice along with a few of the other veterans had dozens of tricks up their sleeves—or wings—when it came to safeguarding and hiding traps.

All the enemy traps, as far as I could see, were already gone, though I knew that they would, indeed, have multiple alarm traps that were protected and well hidden.

The No Man's Land between the two positions was only about 250 meters from trench to trench. The enemy corridor into our territory was only about a kilometer wide. Using some of our literal thousands of *Build Trench* scrolls collected from the previous floor, we'd created a labyrinthian trench system, filled with traps and soldiers, fortified bunkers, hospitals,

fall-back positions, and more. We'd managed, in just over a day, to build defenses to rival anything that had ever been created in this insipid game.

Still, the artillery fire was never-ending. The rocks landed like hail on our positions. The no-man's land, which had been a flat, grassy, flower-covered plain, now looked like the remnants of a building collapse.

Or at least that's what Tran said, from his position in the trench. By the time we arrived, we couldn't see anything through the rolling fog. Both sides were keeping a constant litany of obfuscation spells and illusions going. Counterspells and counter-counterspells caused the no man's land to sometimes roil like the sea.

A quick check of the warlord menu told me we still had a good ten-fifteen minutes before the rest of the reinforcements would arrive. The entirety of the 106th Bloody Leeches were coming to shore up the existing defenders. The 102nd Bulwark, who'd built this outpost, consisted mainly of defense-oriented mages and fortification-building engineers. They had a healthy smattering of hand-to-hand experts, but not nearly enough. The 106th consisted of warriors, trap mechanics, and thieves.

Mongo coughed as we cautiously approached one of the trench entrances a few hundred meters back from the front line. Donut shouted angrily up at me, but I couldn't hear. She moved to chat.

Donut: CARL, THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE. HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FIGHT IN THESE CONDITIONS? THIS REMINDS ME OF THE DUST STORMS FROM THE BUBBLE LEVEL.

She yelped as a ball of flame went up ahead and to our right. The entire ground shook.

Armor Unit number three, "Spider Tank S4" has been destroyed by enemy fire.

Damnit. Something had broken the shield there, and they'd scored a direct hit on one of our spider tanks. I sent out a quick order, but I saw Tran was already on it. We could only deploy ten of these at a time, but we had almost 50 of the simple machines ready to go. They had to remain in pieces until they were needed. Each one took about five minutes of work to replace.

I jumped from the royal chariot, pulled it into my inventory, and I told the platoon to stay close.

Entering the Princess Posse forward position. This position is currently defended by the 102nd Bulwark Battalion. Battalion is currently at 98% strength.

The first step was to find Tran and help him organize the integration with the 106th Bloody Leeches, which was currently led by a former crawler I didn't know named Boomer. I sent both Tran and Colonel Boomer a message, and I told them to meet me at the planning room, a fortified bunker. Both said they were on their way.

I pushed forward, coughing as black smoke billowed. The back of my head continued to tingle with an odd sensation. We reached the forward-most trench, about twelve feet deep with scaffolding at the front so soldiers could easily engage the enemy. A group of black, magical screens dotted the positions. These were all the work of a single mage, a fabricator. They were basically magical periscopes. The same mage was now at the northern front, so if the periscopes broke or were damaged, we'd have to peer over the edge of the trenches the old-fashioned way.

Red-tinged mud filled the bottom of the trench, and it smelled of smoke and earth and sweat. *Jesus*, I thought. *It's just started, too.* Donut jumped to my shoulder, complaining about how dirty everything was. I freed Rend, who was now as tall as my knee. He giggled menacingly as he and Mongo splashed in the slop.

Mages and soldiers with spears and bows and crossbows were spread evenly along the lines, all of them already sweating and exhausted from constantly holding back the giant rocks and poison and flames getting spewed in our direction. All were hunched over, peering into the magical periscopes.

That does not look comfortable, I thought. I put in a mental note to have the positioning adjusted. These guys would have to stand like this for hours on end.

The soldiers on the other side all had pulse rifles and tech shields that could stop anything non-magical. If they got through our shields and into these trenches, we were screwed. A week. We had to hold them back for a week. It seemed impossible. But we had a plan. One to hopefully even the odds a little on the southern front.

Carl: Louis. Elle. Update.

Louis: I'm in. Tell me when to go, and I can be there in about ten minutes. Had to block Samantha from the chat again. She's really mad at me right now.

Elle: A bunch of those robot Reaver guys just pulled up in several trucks and are moving to the enemy trenches. It's getting hard to see through all this damn smoke. I lost track of the invisible Madness guys. There's over 100 of them.

Carl: Okay. Standby. Should be soon. They probably have something planned, too, and we should go before they blow their wad, but we need to wait for the 106th to get everyone in position. Another ten minutes.

Elle: 10-4 boss.

"Guys, what is that?" someone asked as we moved toward the headquarters. Murmuring rose up and down the line. "Is it another illusion?"

"I don't think so," someone else said.

I paused and pulled myself up the scaffolding and peered through one of the free periscopes. They looked like little porthole windows, but I knew they were really just screens. Donut removed her sunglasses and lowered her face to also look, her little nose twitching as she examined the display.

"The resolution on this is just amazing," Donut said. "It's much better than that awful, stolen television you had in the living room."

"It wasn't stolen," I said, trying to figure out what I was looking at. I didn't see anything except smoke. "What are you talking about?"

"You got it from a pawn shop. That means it was stolen. Everybody knows everything you buy from a pawn shop is stolen."

The soldier to my left, a level-59 human **Blood Swimmer** crawler named Ryan Smogo looked up. "They stopped their artillery."

I was about to respond, but a group of orange dots suddenly appeared on my minimap, moving in fast from the enemy side.

Pets. A lot of them. There had to be 1,000 of them.

"Oh, shit," I said as shouts started to rise up and down the line. They were big, and they were coming in fast.

They just kept coming and coming. Only some of the traps were designed to go off if they hit pets, and these started detonating one after another, the explosions like muffled fireworks in the fog.

“Carl,” Donut called. “They’re big and round! Do you think they’re tummy achers?”

“They’re moving way too fast for that. And they’re too big.” I knew Rend had the ability to roll across the battlefield, but I had the impression that the skill was only good for short distances.

“Hang on,” an elf mage called from my right. This was one of the veterans. He strained as he cast a spell. A portion of the swirling smoke dissipated, revealing a horde of the creatures. One of them zoomed big, like his spell included a spyglass effect for everyone to see, almost like a boss battle notification.

Dumplin’. Juiced Rot Sticker Behemoth. Level 40.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from the Gurgles.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from Insanity.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from Not Just Rabies, but Eat-Your-Face-Off-Rabies.

Warning: This Pet has been fed a Truck Stop Boner Pill.

This is a pet of Cybernetician Yeller of the Reavers.

Do you remember the rot stickers? Little ravioli things? These tiny bastards killed a whole bunch of you squishy humans back on the first and second floor. They run up to you, stick themselves to your body, and bam! One or two ain’t too bad, but they travel in swarms. They knock you down and then blow your head off.

We have all sorts of variations of these things in the dungeon because they’re so fun to use. And they’re terrifying, too, which is always an added bonus.

These little monsters, believe it or not, are actual creatures from some distant, probably-horrifying planet. The exploding ones are all male, and when they detonate, what they’re really doing is spreading their seed into one of the goliath, mammal-like creatures of their home world, who’d been previously implanted subcutaneously with the female eggs during the spring. The explosions rarely kill the mammals. They most certainly kill the rot stickers, though, which is why most of these guys are so small. The males tend to live very short lives.

But did you know the boy versions can be pets, too? They’re actually quite loving and faithful if given the opportunity to grow up. If you capture one before it’s big enough to go kaboom, you can give it medicine to make it lose all desire to spread its seed. They get bigger

and bigger and even have a small amount of intelligence. When they get older, they have the same attack as the females, an acid spray, which allows them to hunt and fight alongside you without having to worry about them blowing your kneecap off.

What the Reavers do is grab a bunch of babies and dole them out to their warriors. The warriors rub their tummies, play fetch with them, and help them level up until they reach level 40 or so. The rot stickers grow to love and trust their masters. Then the Reavers lock them in cages, inject them with size-altering steroids, inflict them with a bunch of really nasty, contagious debuffs, and unleash them on enemy positions as biological seeking missiles.

There's an irony there if you look hard enough.

Oh, and they also stop giving them the medicine that keeps them from blowing up. A level 40 Rot Sticker Behemoth packs the same punch as a stick of goblin dynamite.

"Oh my god, Carl," Donut shouted from my shoulder. "Did you read that? And I thought the orcs were terrible people!"

"Shields!" I cried as I prepared my *Protective Shell* and activated my tech-based shield. There were about five of the things right in front of our position, rocketing toward us like enormous bowling balls. Each one was the size of a goddamned Mini Cooper.

"Don't let any of them get on you when they explode!" Smogo called. "They have the Gurgles!"

I prepared to use my *Daughter's Kiss*, but I didn't want to use it here. Not in the trench. It was too dangerous for everyone around me. I was just glad it allowed me to use it at all since it was technically a self-buff skill and not offensive magic.

More cries for shields rose up and down the trench as the giant, exploding monsters approached. Arrows and bolts and spears shot out at the oncoming line of explosive monsters, all ineffective.

"Head's up," I called as I pulled a stick of full-strength hobgoblin dynamite, and I tossed it over the edge of the trench like a grenade. We all ducked, covering our ears.

The explosion went off, rocking the ground. A few experience notifications flew by, including a new achievement. I turned back to the periscope, and they were still coming, but we'd cleared out the ones immediately in front of us. I prepared a second stick of dynamite.

“I’m feeling very useless all of a sudden, Carl,” Donut cried. “None of my spells work! Wait, *Love Vampire* works!” A moment later, she scoffed. “It doesn’t work on pets!”

Far to my left, a group of mages cast a spell, and a spine of dirt rose in the air, like a physical wall between us and the onrushing attackers. The vertical wall rose ten feet into the air, crackling loudly as it built itself, blocking our view of the oncoming pets.

They hit the earthworks a moment later, some of them going up and shooting up into the air like they were launched from a ramp. The rest crashed to a stop against the dirt. A few here and there detonated, showering rock and gore.

We all looked up at the scattering of giant ravioli things that had launched themselves into the air. Only a few appeared as if they would land on our side.

One of them, far down the line, exploded in mid-air, showering gore over the trench. The rest crashed back down, disappearing back again behind the wall as thorns as thick as my arm sprouted from the dirt, encompassing them.

“I need my moles!” an amplified voice yelled. “Blow the line!” I turned to see Tran skitter down the trench, his voice supernaturally amplified. The same words appeared on my interface, coming across the top of my HUD, which was a notification style I’d never seen before.

A group of gnome-sized crawlers and veterans disappeared down a group of holes built at regular intervals along the trench wall. One of them was a shirtless gnome with a massive, poorly-drawn mole tattoo on his chest. It read “The Frothing Tunnel Moles” on it. I knew the Moles were one of our SOFs. Special Operations Forces. We only had a few of these guys here. The rest were in Shanty Town with Britney or back at the base with Justice Light.

A short moment passed—shorter than I was expecting—and the dwarves and gnomes started popping back out from the tunnels in the ground, reappearing in the trenches.

“Fire in the hole,” someone shouted, and we all hit the deck again as the entire line of dirt in front of us exploded. I was physically lifted from the scaffolding, and people called out all around as we crashed heavily down. Donut cried out in pain as the human next to us landed on her tail. Below, Mongo squawked in fear and Rend started running in panicked circles as

the sky went completely black. Showers of dirt fell over us, but stopped at an invisible barrier. Soon we were completely entombed by the dirt and guts, hovering just above us. All around, mages shouted and cursed as they attempted to keep the gore-infected dirt from falling all over us.

Back in place. Back in place. Defend the line. The notification appeared across my interface, blinking. I pulled myself up, but my periscope was cracked and no longer working. Still, it appeared nothing else was coming for the moment. At least, there was nothing on my interface.

A moment later, the artillery resumed. I closed out the Daughter's Kiss activation, and a pang of pain ripped across my ribs.

"Damn," Tran said, scurrying up to me, looking worriedly up at the dirt above us. A rock crashed over our head, and a low shield warning appeared before it was shored up. Tran's metallic helmet disappeared into his inventory. Sections of dirt started to glow as mages cleaned it. "We were hoping to save those buried explosives for later. We just set that up like two hours ago."

I examined Tran. Katia had finished building his two-part "wheelchair," and it was similar to what she was going to next build for Jamal. She'd taken a recipe from my automaton manual and had repurposed it.

He had a small, mechanical crab body that looked like something out of a nightmare. When he was just walking around like normal, that's all there was. A mechanical crab body that he could use to climb on walls. He could run, for short distances, at incredible speed.

But then there was the battle armor version, which he wore now. It was as if Odette and Iron Man had a baby. A secondary exo-skeleton covered the crab legs, crawling up his body, encasing him in full-plate armor and a helmet, reminiscent of poor Paz from the previous floor. Tran was so encased in metal that he couldn't carry any ranged weapons, lest the system label him as "armor."

I started to say something, but a commotion down the line caused us all to turn.

"Gurglers in the trenches!" an elf shouted as she rushed through the center of the trench. She rushed toward us, pursued by a group of about ten veterans who were all screaming toward us, blood spewing from their mouths and eyes. Someone cast a spell, filling that section with dirt. The wall appeared right in front of us. Another with a Tserendolgor-like flamethrower pushed me aside and started baking the filled-in section of

dirt. A dozen arms and legs and claws emerged as the infected started pulling themselves free, only to be burned and melted by the powerful weapon.

Fallen soldier notifications blinked across my interface. The woman with the flamethrower was a crawler I recognized. A level 56 **Crisper** named **Kristen Cronin**. She sat heavily on the ground and started to sob. The whole thing had happened in a matter of seconds.

“This is bullshit,” Cronin said. “The Gurgles is a magical attack.”

“They infected their pets before the magic ban, so it’s an exploit,” another voice answered. “It’s a little iffy, but they’ve allowed it in the past. Your mages need to do a better job at keeping such infections from sneaking in.” I blinked, realizing this was actually Baroness Victory, hands on her hips, examining the still-glowing dirt as she moved next to me and Tran. She must have teleported herself into the battle.

“What in the goodness are the Gurgles?” Donut asked. After making sure Mongo was okay, she’d returned to my shoulder. Rend leaned up against my legs, making a popping noise with his mouth. Despite being scared earlier, he didn’t seem afraid anymore. I patted him on his uneven head, and he let out an unsettling purr.

“A really nasty, contagious, non-curable debuff,” Victory said. “The factions had agreed many years ago to never use it again because it’s so insidious. It’s what caused the insanity and the rabies debuff. I’m not familiar with that fourth debuff. The truck stop pill. I suspect that it was what made them so big.”

“I think we’re clear of enemies for now,” someone on the line said. “Gods, do you think they got more of those things?”

I cracked my neck and looked at Tran. “I don’t know about the rot stickers, but they have 100 invisible Madness mercenaries and several armored vehicles. Let’s not wait to find out. Now it’s our turn.”

“THE LEECHES ARE IN PLACE,” COLONEL BOOMER SAID, CHOMPING ON HIS unlit cigar. “Ready to pluck some cheese sticks.” I examined the man. He was a grizzled, old elf that had survived one of the earliest seasons of *Dungeon Crawler World*. He looked like someone had taken the world’s fattest bulldog, pickled it for about 5,000 years, gave him elf ears, and then shoved a cigar in his mouth. I would never have guessed he was an elf. He looked as solid as he was old. He had a voice to match.

Boomer. Elven Legate. Level 62.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

His class of “Legate” led to some confusion, but it allowed him to buff a large number of soldiers at once. According to Tipid, the old man had been an outspoken critic of the crawl for a very long time. He was a tenner, someone who’d bowed out on the 10th floor, and he’d survived as a merchant on the sixth floor for many, many seasons before finally escaping. He’d been banned from Crawl Con years ago after threatening to “Fist fuck” an orcish show runner to death during a panel. Porthus had publicly distanced himself from the militant, former crawler after that, but apparently, they’d been in close contact the whole time.

There was an active warrant for the old man’s arrest after a deadly waystation brawl a few cycles back. A brawl that had started after an

argument about the crawl. He'd killed someone and had disappeared into the ether. The man had become a legend after that.

Tipid had immediately put the old elf in charge of the 106th Bloody Leeches, and the soldiers all loved him. His weapons were a pair of war gauntlets similar to my Grull gauntlet.

Donut was oddly fascinated by the old elf. She couldn't stop staring at him, and I had a running commentary in my chat from her.

Donut: HE LOOKS LIKE HE MIGHT STINK, BUT HE ACTUALLY SMELLS QUITE NICE. LIKE CEDAR MIXED WITH ACORNS. YOU KNOW, LIKE HOW A GIFTSHOP IN AN EXPENSIVE MOUNTAIN RETREAT WOULD SMELL. DO YOU THINK HE'D BE MAD IF I CALLED HIM 'POPS?' HE LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE WHO'D BE CALLED POPS. BOOMER DOESN'T FIT HIM AT ALL. BOOMER SOUNDS LIKE THE NAME OF SOMEONE WHO PEAKED IN HIGH SCHOOL AND NOW SELLS ALUMINUM SIDING. DO YOU THINK HE EVER LIGHTS THAT DISGUSTING CIGAR? BECAUSE THAT WOULD JUST RUIN IT.

She was nervous about the upcoming assault, and I just let her go on and on as we looked over the map.

The entrance corridor in and out of the Naga territory was relatively flat, but it gave way to a few small hills on the Naga side, just south of their own trenches.

"Their trenches are here," Tran said, drawing the line on the map. He pointed to the hills. "According to Elle, the Dream's artillery batteries are here. They have approximately 40 of the big trebuchets set up and dozens of the small ones. The big ones can hit anywhere in our territory and are what have been pounding our base. The smaller, more mobile trebuchets have less range but are still deadly and are what have been hitting our trenches." To accent the point, we all ducked as a rock smashed just above our position, the sound like a car crash. The pounding was constant, designed to exhaust our mages. "I still don't understand why they can have these things, but we can't."

Colonel Boomer leaned over the map, examining all the marks. Two of the trebuchet positions were circled with "Anti-air?" written on them.

"Most of those pasty cousin fuckers from the Dream are cowards," Boomer said. "At least the ones with the bombardier class. Those are the guys who hump a desk when they're not in here playing genocide. They'll

run if we get close to their chuckers. They'll have 'em surrounded with traps, too, so we gotta be careful. Your spy says they have cavalry in the area? *Those* are the cheese sticks you really gotta look out for, especially now the Epitome household guard is in here with us. The Epitome family ain't stupid. Their security forces are all veterans of non-dungeon conflicts and are tough as gristle. Dunno if they'd toss 'em to the front this early. Epitome Tagg likes to fight near the front, but he usually doesn't have his honor guard in here with him. He'll be with them, and they won't be hiding. Speaking of cheese sticks. He wears the most ridiculous helmet you've ever seen."

"Really?" Donut asked.

Tran nodded. "They do have mounts. There's 50 of the zebras, but it looks like the riders are all mercenaries, not the Dream household guard." He tapped a hill further south of the artillery on the map. "Elle thinks they're in reserve in case we break through. Not too many of the actual elves in the area that we've seen. Just a few running the larger trebuchets. And they have twenty tanks sitting idle here." He patted another spot on the map.

"They haven't moved since they were uncovered," I said. "I wonder if they're decoys. Elle said she would take a closer look, but I told her to stay back."

These tanks, if they were real, *were* considered armor, and they were all WWI style troop carriers with various turrets. I suspected if they were real, they were the same as our Spider Tanks. Temporary pieces of crap that would serve a purpose until they were either disassembled or blown to hell.

"And finally," Tran said, "Elle watched at least 100 of the Madness go invisible and disappear, so they could be anywhere. Likely sneaking in right now."

"They all in robes and masks?" Colonel Boomer asked.

Tran nodded. "That's what she says."

"There probably ain't that many of the real Viceroy's in here," Boomer replied, chewing on his cigar. "Probably a bunch o' the regular cheese sticks wearing the robes. Still, we need to find those creepy fucks. The ones that go invisible and sneak in are called the Monkeywrenchers. A few seasons back, a group of 20 of them single-handedly took the Dreadnaught and Naga castles during the first few hours. The Madness as a whole looks like a particularly strong contender this season." The old elf turned his head and

spit on the floor. Rend waddled over and started licking at the spittle before I could admonish him.

I had no idea where the term “Cheese Stick” had originated, but it had spread through the army like wildfire. It’s what everyone called the enemy soldiers. I’d seen a few “Fuck the Cheese Sticks” tattoos already.

Boomer ran a finger along the line of enemy trenches on the map. “Hmmm. These positions are less protected than what they got in the north. Are we sure they’re still set up like this?”

“Elle eyeballed them just a few minutes ago,” I said.

Both sides had fallback trenches. Ours were all connected with tunnels we could collapse on demand. The other side had a set of three trenches, each one about 100 meters behind the previous. If there were tunnels between the three trench systems, we weren’t aware of them, and in the past, they’d never bothered with tunnels. If they had to retreat, they’d have to pop up and withdraw over open land before they could jump into their fallback positions.

“Do we have a good idea of who’s in the trenches?” Boomer asked.

Tran nodded. “Enemy fallback position three looks to be their officers and hospital corp. Trench two is mostly empty, but it has a few guards. Everyone else is in the first trench system, which isn’t anything like ours. It’s just a straight line with a few bunks. It’s manned solely by NPCs and mercenaries as far as we can tell. No inner circle officers from any of the teams. Most of the banners are Prism. It might be *all* of the Prism based on the numbers. I was expecting more Naga infantry, but I see only one of their standards.”

Empress D’Nadia’s territory was just south of the Nagas, in spot number five, so it made sense she’d commit most of her force between us and her headquarters. But that also made me worry about where the rest of the Nagas were hiding.

Tran continued. “A smaller portion of Madness troops are also present, but the Madness mercs are really from the Lemig team they just took over. No orcs. No Operatics. Only a few Reavers, and those were the ones with the pets.”

I knew on the northern front, they faced a much larger force. This map in front of us now focused on the southern campaign, but it still had the northern line on it. I tapped it. “Florin and Katia say they’re mostly fighting the orcs, the blobs, the Dream regulars, and more of the Madness along

with a smattering of the others. So it looks like we have accounted for most everybody's forces except the Reavers and the Naga team."

"The Reavers are the ones with the flying machines usually, so we gotta be on the lookout," Boomer said, pointing up in the air with his cigar. "Speaking of, where's our boy?"

"He's here," I said, pointing at the woods. "He's on the ground now, hidden in the middle of nowhere. He's not gonna remain hidden for long, which is why we gotta get moving. We ready?"

"My boys and girls all had their breakfast and are ready to tear it up," Boomer said. "We're just waiting for the 'go' order." He eyed Tran. "Your magic slingers ready for this?"

Tran nodded. His metallic crab legs moved up and down, telegraphing how nervous Tran was.

"And the NPC team?" Boomer asked.

Carl: Britney. We're almost ready. Are your guys in place?

Britney: They're ready. Waiting on you.

I wasn't exactly sure when and how this happened, but Britney had pretty much become our main liaison with the NPCs. Originally, we were hoping to use one of their massive diggers for this, but the geography of the Naga territory made this difficult. So instead, we were using just a pair of changeling spies. We couldn't talk to them directly, so instead everything had to filter from me to Britney to either Juice Box or Arief of the Semeru.

I slid my finger across the map. From the border to the Blood Sultanate castle, it was just about eight miles. According to Juice Box, the Nagas had deliberately built their castle on rocky ground to stop anyone from tunneling in from below. Still, their headquarters was built strangely close to the edge of Shanty Town, unlike everyone else who'd placed themselves equidistant from all borders. On my shoulder, Donut had gone stiff. She, too, was looking at the Naga headquarters. I reached up and gave her a pat.

Historically, despite their protections, this Naga castle was almost always the first to fall. But every single time, by the time the invaders reached the Whore's inner sanctum, the leader of the naga would be gone. The team would still lose because they'd lose their throne room, but the naga leader had never been captured or assassinated. Not once since the Sultana took over. She'd disappear and reappear at the end, laughing and joking with everyone else, having stayed hidden the whole time. Nobody

knew the secret as to where she'd hide herself during the majority of the conflict or what she was doing.

If we wanted to get to her, we'd have to be *very* careful with how we did it.

"Let's do this," I said.

Boomer produced a lighter and lit his cigar. He took a long, single puff that seemed to go on forever. He let out a long stream of smoke that filled the room.

"Fuck yeah," he said.

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<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER OSSIE, 18TH EDITION>

If you want to create fright amongst an otherwise stalwart enemy, confusion is always the key.

We stood in the trench, Dong Quixote to my left, Holger to my right, and Donut on my shoulder as mages heaped protection spells on our group. Across from us, the spine of dirt that had protected us from the rot sticker attack was slowly, slowly getting eroded away by the enemy artillery. We could have the mages fix it, but we needed it worn down for our assault, and we needed it kept down should we have to retreat.

You have been Titivated. Projectiles do less damage.

I had never had this many stacked shields on me at once. I had Rend in his carrier because he was too slow. Mongo was out and tense, ready.

Imani dropped into the trench, landing next to me. Donut, still on my shoulder, gave her a headbutt as Mongo let out a screech.

“I didn’t think you’d get here in time,” I said as she spread her ethereal wings out. The wisps filled the tight channel, glowing as a new line of buffs added themselves to the pile. All around me, people sighed with pleasure at the warm feeling of calm that washed over us. I felt the rush of power.

“Now that’s something,” Holger said. He was in beaver form. “Ain’t never felt a buff like that before.”

“I was buffing people down the line,” Imani said. “And before that, I was helping with the trebuchet. I buffed the guy aiming the thing. He’s ready to go.”

We only had one trebuchet of our own. It was one of the smaller ones. Donut and I had looted it on the sixth floor from some Dream elves. The original plan was to have more of the weapons, but the confusion about whether we’d be allowed to even build these mixed with the early end to the ceasefire had led to us only having one. The weapon was loaded with about 50 contraptions called Dazzlers, and they had a pile of almost 200 of them sitting nearby. They were basically a combination of an alarm and a spotlight trap. They would only shine toward the eyes of the closest enemy soldier, strobing powerful beams of multi-colored light right into their faces. And they’d all play the same song at the same time. It was one of the few types of trap modules Victory would allow us to load into the trebuchets.

Speaking of the adjutant, she cracked into existence just behind us, like I’d summoned her with my thoughts. I was finally getting used to the orc’s constant comings and goings.

But this time, she wasn’t alone. Mongo squawked in surprise and would’ve lunged if a quick shout from Donut hadn’t stopped him. It was Drick.

The sight of the Dream elf adjutant for the NPC team suddenly appearing in our trenches caused a few moments of bedlam until I shouted everyone down.

The wormhead held up a hand in greeting, smiling sheepishly at the chaos his appearance caused. “Sorry, folks. Since Team Retribution is taking a small part in this assault, I’ve decided to come watch from the best position.”

“You won’t see anything from here,” I said.

The elf shrugged. “If you prefer I zap to their side and warn them something is about to happen, I can do that instead.”

I knew he could do just that if he wanted. Victory had told me that adjutants could go invisible if they needed to observe something where their presence would give away that their team was up to something. I was going

to say something sarcastic, but I dropped it. Louis sent in a message, and I turned back to the periscope screen.

Louis: We see the target. Lowering for the bombing run now.

Carl: Not too low. In and out. Get into the fog as soon as you drop.

Elle: They don't see him yet. Man, I wish I could cast my *Graupel* spell.

Carl: You're up, Elle. And for god's sake, keep moving.

Elle: I have the first anti-air gun targeted. I hope this missile launcher of yours works as advertised, Carl. Firing the moment Louis drops.

Carl: Britney, send 'em in.

Britney: The NPC team is on their way.

I patted Donut. "You ready?"

Donut nodded. Imani reached over and cast a spell. A bubble appeared around Donut's head, similar to a Desperado Club privacy shell. Imani had it as a spell, but Mordecai had also mass-made a potion that did the same thing. The potion was simple enough that he'd managed to make gallons of the stuff with his cauldron attachment at his upgraded table. Still, there wasn't enough for all of us, so those of us with regular ears had to use old-fashioned earplugs that were enchanted with a buff ominously called **This Thingy Works Slightly Better Than It's Supposed To**.

Imani reached down and patted Mongo, and she cast the spell on the dinosaur as well.

The spell was called *Total Ear Protection*.

"Do it," I said.

"WHAT?" Donut asked, shouting. "OH, OKAY."

Warlord Donut: OKAY EVERYONE. AS SOON AS THAT FIRST BOMB DROPS, TAKE THE EAR POTION OR PUT IN YOUR EARPLUGS. WE MOVE TO CHAT. DRINK THE *INVISIBILITY* POTION WHEN YOU CAN, THE MAGES WILL CAST *OBFUSCATION* ON US, AND WE GO UP AND OVER. DON'T STOP RUNNING UNTIL YOU'RE IN THEIR TRENCHES. THE SOLDIER WHO BRINGS ME THE MOST DEAD CHEESE STICKS GETS A PRIZE. I BELIEVE IN ALL OF YOU.

"A prize?" I asked as I continued to peer through the periscope, waiting for the first explosion.

"WHAT?" Donut asked.

Carl: A prize?

“YES, CARL. SOME OF THE VETERANS WERE TELLING ME WHEN THEY WERE CONSCRIPTED DURING THE LAST TIME THEY FOUGHT IN FACTION WARS, THE OFFICERS WERE ALWAYS THREATENING THEM WHEN THEY GAVE ORDERS. WELL, MY ARMY IS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT. POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT IS A VERY GOOD MOTIVATOR. IT WORKED WITH MONGO, AND IT’S GOING TO WORK HERE.”

“Yeah, we’ll see if you still think that in a few hours,” I muttered as I continued to watch. *Come on, Louis.*

I couldn’t see anything. Roiling clouds filled No Man’s Land, hugging the ground. And above, a low ceiling of black clouds hung heavy over our heads, giving the impression that we were getting crushed from above. Night was falling, and it would soon be dark, which was good for our plans. Still, the clouds occasionally gave way to rocks that whistled through the air as they landed around our positions. Only some of the rocks were explosive, or contained fog, or poison, or a hundred other things that weren’t “offensive” magic or magic at all. A strange, ozone-like scent filled the air as it was filtered out by one of the hundreds of concurrent protection spells.

The plan had many parts, but each individual component was simple and straightforward. Most every soldier only had a single objective. The failure of one part did not mean the rest of the plan would fail.

I hoped.

The assault part of this plan had not come from me, but was one of many contingencies that Tipid and Rosetta had brought with them from the outside, which was part of the reason why we’d been able to put this together so smoothly. It was only the second part that I’d planned out. Me, Donut, Katia, Imani, Elle, and Mordecai had put it together with some input from Baroness Victory. Katia wouldn’t be actively participating since she was needed on the other front, and I found myself missing her dearly. I still hadn’t had a chance to talk to her since we’d separated from the dreamworld.

The enemy was expecting us to defend and try to hold out for a full week because we would be much stronger once the offensive magic ban was lifted. Their plan, meanwhile, was to soften us up with their artillery and try to overwhelm us as quickly as they could. They would soon push in

on us with their full might, probably from the north and south at the same time. If they could breach and get in now, they would easily sweep in to victory.

Bam! The first, distant explosion wasn't loud, but it was loud enough to crack across the battlefield, the concussion slapping me right in the chest.

The bombs were strong, but their main purpose wasn't to simply blow stuff up. The enemy trenches, while not as protected as ours, were still covered with layers of anti-explosive fortifications. The bombs Louis dropped were not targeting the enemy trenches. Instead, Louis was aiming the *Party Planner* in a straight line right in front of their position. The bombs would do three things. One, they'd leave a deep crater in the unprotected land just in front of their trenches; two, they'd shower dirt over the defenders, which their mages would have to clear off; and three, the bombs would clear any traps and protection enhancements set up right there in front of the enemy line.

I gave Donut a quick pat and then a thumbs up.

Warlord Donut: GO, GO, GO!

Multiple things happened at once.

"For the Posse!" a veteran to my left shouted. He downed an *Invisibility* potion as he launched himself up and over the trench.

"Fuck the cheese sticks" someone else yelled as they, too, propelled themselves onto No Man's Land before disappearing.

A second, then a third, then a fourth explosion walked its way across the enemy lines. I couldn't see the detonations through the fog, but I could hear them, and I could feel them in the ground.

At the same moment, Elle reported she'd hit the first anti-air battery with a missile, but there was a protection spell around it. Still, the device had fallen over and hopefully would be unable to fire for some time. She would now be moving to the second one.

Our one and only trebuchet fired its first of four salvos, spreading the Dazzlers in and around the middle section of Louis's craters.

The announcement came, louder than I was expecting. *Much* louder, even this far away. Justice Light's tips on enhancing these things really worked. And there were 50 of them so far. I slipped my earplugs in.

They barely helped.

Peaking at Number 3 on June 20, 2020 – Wait, really? Huh. – Anyway, Peaking at Number 3 on June 20, 2020, despite first coming

out in 1992, It's "Killing in the Name."

The Rage Against the Machine Song echoed, powerfully loud, literally shaking the ground louder than the explosions.

Anyone within a few hundred meters of the things would experience immediate, painful hearing damage. Combined with the flashing lights, it wasn't going to be fun for anyone in those trenches.

Britney: Enemy spies are reporting that they have breached the second trench.

Louis: Holy shit that was scary. I got hit with a few spells, but the shields held. Circling around to the rendezvous.

All around, people screamed as they continued to pull themselves up and over the trenches. Flashing lights filled the dark as pulse rifles fired into our troops, mostly bouncing up and off various shields.

I downed the *Invisibility* potion just as Donut did the same. I smashed another *Invisibility* against Mongo's backside as Donut jumped onto Mongo's back. Despite the invisibility, she glittered with all the shields and protection spells. Thankfully, we had several illusionists with us who were also casting spells, making illusionary doubles of everyone, along with a few illusionary war machine tanks, to focus their fire.

Our squad was to wait a few moments before we went up and over.

Carl: You scared?

Donut: Of course I am, Carl. But I think I'm used to it now. It's more numb than anything. I think nowadays it hits me more when it's done than when it's happening.

A strange swell of sadness hit me. I wanted to pat her, but my own hand was trembling too much.

Carl: We're up. Stay next to me, and keep your shield up.

Donut, still astride Mongo, leapt up over the edge, followed by Imani.

I put my hand on the handhold built into the top part of the trench. I felt myself shouting, and I didn't even know what I was saying. I pulled myself up and over into No Man's Land, joining over two thousand members of the Princess Posse as we engaged our first head-on assault into enemy fire.

CHAOS.

I couldn't see more than two or three feet in front of me. The music blared, painfully loud despite the earplugs. Lights strobed everywhere, and even though none were pointed directly at me, it still made my stomach lurch. Donut and Mongo's dot was just to my right. I couldn't see them. Dong and Holger had veered off in the dark, combining with a group to our left.

It was like a dream, one where you ran and ran, but you didn't move.

I came to the remnants of the dirt spine from the rot sticker defense, and I scrambled over it. We had to watch out for the corpses, as they could still be dangerous.

Plink. Plink.

Each sound was a casualty notification for the current battle. Each notification was like a stab right in my chest.

The flat land had turned into a wasteland. Rocks littered the battlefield. The gleam of resistant traps glittered, undisturbed by all of this. They were all ours. Pulse lights occasionally ripped from the enemy side, cutting through the fog like scythes. One sparked against the edge of my shield, and it would've taken half of my head off if I hadn't been so wrapped in protection. I caught a glimpse of the translucent form of Imani to my left, stopped, hovering over a veteran who screamed, his arm now gone.

Don't stop running. Don't stop running.

Plink, plink, plink, plink.

A group of poison-infused rocks crashed around us, cracking, breaking, rolling, trailing fumes. The smoke took on a green hue. Shrapnel showered. The shrapnel pinged against my shields like fireflies.

I thought of my grandparent's house in Texas. They had fireflies there, and we didn't have any in Washington. Why would I think of that now?

Plink. Plink.

I ran. I ran.

Thwoom. Thwoom. New, orange-tinged explosions rippled all around us. I couldn't hear the strange detonations. I felt them in my chest. Grenades. These were of some high-tech variety I'd never seen before. They were tossing them at the tanks. The tanks which didn't really exist.

My stomach lurched with pain. I physically staggered. For a moment, I thought I'd been hit.

It was the soul poisoning. *Almost there. Almost there.*

Crack! A big fireworks exploded in the air above us, again more felt than heard.

For a moment, everything cleared. It was a magic diffusion spell. A big one.

You've been Deshrouded. Your War Protections are gone! Like, all of them!

All the illusions disappeared. The smoke dissipated. Everyone was visible. All of our temporary protection spells snapped off, including the ear protection.

The lights and music from the Dazzlers spells did *not* turn off.

To my right, Donut and Mongo both appeared to be screaming with pain. Mongo reared up at the sound.

For just a flash of a moment, we had a non-obscured view across the dimly-lit battlefield. I could see them, right in front of us, closer than I expected. Most of the enemy line looked as if it was a dirt mound. It was still covered with the dirt from Louis's bombs. But there were some clear spaces, and in these spaces, I could see them. Bugbears, gnolls, dreadnaughts, humans, nagas, saccathians, and dozens of other aliens, mixed in with dungeon-born NPCs. I could tell the difference easily, as the mercenaries all held guns. They wore armor that glowed with electric light. They were out of place here, in this world. The NPCs were armed with bows and spears. They were covered with furs and armor.

Not all were facing us, as several had turned away from the painfully-bright light. Very few actually had their weapons up. Most had their hands over their ears or their eyes.

Still, in that moment, I could see a few with full helmets, undisturbed by the lights and the music. They held steady as they fired directly at us, the lights of their weapons punching directly into the onrushers. A group of three directly in front of us had what looked like a large, .50 caliber heavy machine gun. It shot a constant, whipping stream of light in our direction, cutting through us like chaff.

Grenades and missiles also streaked in our direction, exploding up and down our assault.

Plink. Plink. Plink. The sound had turned into one constant hum, and I had to mute it.

I shouldered to my right, knocking Mongo and Donut behind a rock as I also hit the deck. The heavy pulse gun arced past our position, silently ripping and sheering through boulders. Burning heat flashed over us as we ducked.

I pulled a full-strength hob-lobber, and I tossed it in the direction of the heavy gun. I saw a flash, but I received no experience notification. Still, the gun stopped firing. I patted Mongo on the top of the tail, and we got up to keep running.

Both sides were refilling the area with more smoke, and my view of the enemy trench faded away. I continued to rush toward it, dodging rocks, and now, bodies.

Imani was suddenly beside me, flying a foot off the ground. Donut's ear protection reappeared, followed by Mongo's. Donut was shouting something I couldn't hear, but I saw the tell-tale glow as she healed the pet. Imani disappeared into the fray, angling toward a fallen soldier.

I tossed a Troll Smoke Mantle in front of us, in the direction of the gun. We had no idea how long it would be down. Illusions started reappearing around us. Buffs started stacking. Debuffs also started to appear and disappear from my list. My Emberus ring burned.

Warlord Carl: Go. Forward!

I hadn't meant to send that in the war chat, but to Donut. The message flashed across everyone's screens. They complied. I returned to my full height, and I ran.

A bolt crashed into my shoulder, hitting with the force of a sledgehammer. My tech shield fizzled out. The next hit would take me down. I hadn't re-taken my *Invisibility*. I kept running.

Your Soul Poisoning is worsening. You will now suffer from Post Coital Blues.

What the hell does that mean?

Far to my right, another rock hit the ground and rolled, flaming through the smoke. Screams. This was a new type of weapon. More flaming rocks spun toward us. I swerved as the rock blurred in my vision, disappearing into the smoke.

Colonel Boomer: Hitting the craters.

Warlord Carl: Do it!

The moment after I sent the command, the ground under me gave way, and we fell into the wide crater in front of the trenches. Mongo landed deftly next to me. Imani landed to my left. The rest of our squad was scattered. Imani had two soldiers over each shoulder, and she dropped them heavily. One was dead. A Crest veteran. The other, a crawler woman with arm blades was at 2% health and was unconscious.

We were not protected in these craters. We were going to have grenades raining on us at any moment.

I clicked from **Full Assault Band** to **Near Proximity Band** in the war chat.

Warlord Carl: Keep Back. Reading the scroll.

I pulled up the scroll, and I clicked on it. This took about 10 seconds to work. A translucent line appeared, along with a map in my interface.

Build Trench has activated. I turned the line 90 degrees, so it intersected with the existing enemy trench, making a T symbol. My hands shook, and my stomach lurched, again, with pain.

This Trench intersects with an existing trench. Do you wish to enjoin?

I clicked **Yes**.

Warning: Your elevation is lower than the existing trench. Do you wish to proceed?

I clicked **Yes**, and then **Dig**.

A channel appeared right in front of me. And at the end of the passage, a Saccathian soldier slammed into the ground, not twenty feet in front of us. The soldier, who had just been standing, facing north, suddenly had the

ground underneath him disappear. His helmet cracked in the fall, and his rifle went flying.

The enemies did not build their trenches as deep or as wide as we did. That made sense, since despite their head start, they'd had to dig these manually.

All around me, in other craters, soldiers were now using their *Build Trench* scrolls to do the same, building entrances into the enemy trenches, enjoining the tunnels and thus passing right through most of the protections.

This was a long-existing exploit with the *Build Trench* scroll. The scrolls were craft magic, so it pretty much ignored most protections, as they weren't meant to be used offensively. The scroll didn't care who was casting it. According to Tipid, this was something that had been pointed out years and years ago, but it had never been fixed. Just one of thousands of possible exploits that the viewers liked to talk about on the galactic internet. The *Build Trench* scrolls, despite being handed out like candy to us crawlers during the last floor, were rarely used by the Faction Wars participants because they were expensive, and as such, possible exploits were rarely used since there were dozens of other, more spectacular ways to break into trenches.

A trap module, already blasting the music, landed in the crater with us, and it rolled to a stop, facing the Saccathian. The squid-faced soldier had torn his shattered helmet off, and he had his tentacles up, trying to cover both his ear holes and his eyes as he writhed on the ground. The light was so bright, his wet, dolphin-like skin started to smoke.

I grinned at the Saccathian soldier as red dots appeared all around on my map. These were soldiers running to protect the dozens of new breaches in their defenses.

I activated *Daughter's Kiss* on my right foot.

Warlord Carl: Take cover!

I ran toward the struggling soldier, I jumped into the air, and I landed hard onto the enemy's chest.

DONUT: CARL, CARL GET UP. IT'S WORKING. THEY'RE RUNNING.

I coughed, shaking my head. What had happened? I'd conked out the second I'd killed the guy. My interface was a wall of notifications. I'd gone unconscious, but not for too long. Maybe twenty, thirty seconds.

I'd gone up a level. I had another message, something I'd been expecting for a while now, but I put it aside for the moment. Donut was going to be pissed the moment I chose my next stat point. I scrolled the messages.

"What happened?" I asked before I realized nobody could hear me.

Mongo stood next to me, completely covered in dirt. Donut sat astride the dinosaur's back, also covered in mud and blood. Happy shouting and cheers filled the battle chat, but I still couldn't see or hear anything. Smoke was everywhere. All of our guard were missing from the area, but a quick check of the roster showed they were still alive. I blinked at Dong Quixote's level. He'd gone from 45 to 51. As I watched, it blinked up another spot.

Carl: What happened?

Imani: The second you did that attack, you had a debuff called Post Nut Clarity. You were out for 25 seconds. You buried us in dirt. Don't do that again when we're that close. We gotta move. You blew apart their trench. Now's our chance.

Carl: What the hell? What about the guys from Team Retribution?

Imani: They did it. They report the middle trench is filled and that the illusion spell over it all is holding.

I looked around. We were surrounded by dead enemies. Any semblance of order was gone. The third or fourth salvo of Dazzlers soared over our heads, landing, as planned, between the first, now-captured trench and the enemy's fallback position, the middle trench. For a moment I thought my earplugs were working better, but I knew from experience, what was really happening. My hearing was shot and wouldn't repair itself until we were out of range of the music.

The Post Nut Clarity was, apparently, a debuff from my soul poisoning that knocked me out once I activated my *Daughter's Kiss*. That was dangerous as fuck. I needed to make certain I used the skill from now on before the debuff activated. I pulled myself up.

Elle: The second anti-air battery is down! Louis, hurry your ass up! The first one is almost back up. I'm running. They have a pair of mages on my scent.

Imani: Get the hell out of there!

I moved to the warlord menu.

The command of this assault has been transferred to Colonel Boomer.

Colonel Boomer: Quit yer celebrating, all. Nobody fights harder than someone that's trapped. Only a few of them will be dumb enough to jump into that middle trench. I need you to form up. Don't push too hard. We don't want them surrendering. We want them thinking it's a stalemate. Generals, you guys have maybe a half of an hour before they either escape or we gotta kill all of them.

Louis: I'm landing at the rendezvous.

Carl: Heading toward your position now, Louis. Give us thirty seconds.

We turned away from the fight and started jogging back north, headed the way we'd come just as *Party Planner* appeared on the map. It landed awkwardly on the ground as we rushed up.

I blinked at the sight of Bonnie the gnome standing at a position behind a door gun. The tiny gnome girl wore an oversized Dallas Cowboys jersey and a helmet much too big for her as she stood behind the giant gun, which appeared to be a belt-fed ballista hybrid.

Carl: Louis, what the hell? I told you not to let the kids onto this thing! How is she even here?

Louis: Talk to Donut. She's the one who let Bonnie take the last scout spot while you were doing your dream therapy.

Donut: SHE'S OLDER THAN I AM, CARL.

Bonnie gave me a salute as Donut jumped into the air vehicle.

I just shook my head and turned to Imani. She wasn't coming with us. She was tasked with saving as many injured as she could.

I put my hand on her shoulder. The thin woman and I held eyes for a moment. She nodded before she turned back to the battlefield. We didn't exchange any messages beyond that.

I pulled myself into the low-ceilinged aircraft. Mongo hesitated, but he jumped up after I unleashed Rend into the passenger compartment.

Louis: Hang on, folks. We are going to move to full speed and then we'll hit the deck. We'll be at the enemy castle before they know it. Elle says our path is clear of anti-air guns, but we'll see. I'll shout if we have to do some evasive maneuvers.

As we rose into the air, we moved through a thick, choking cloud of smoke. It was fully dark outside now. As we hovered over the broken and surrendered enemy trench, I could see nothing but smoke and more flashing lights on the ground where our soldiers held the fleeing enemy in place. We needed to hurry this up. I sent one last message to the assault message group.

Warlord Carl: Break them all.

Party Planner flew fast and low, smoothly gliding over the plains like the thin strip of air under the vehicle was ice. Our target was just under thirty miles away, and we had to take a very specific path to make it there. We rode in silence. I was keeping tabs with both Colonel Boomer and Florin, but mostly I watched Donut, who didn't appear to be speaking with anyone. She sat against the wall of the fuselage, her eyes closed. Mongo lay on the floor next to her, cramped against the now-empty bomb racks. Donut appeared to be asleep, but I could tell she wasn't.

Louis's crew was himself, Bonnie, and a changeling scout who was suspiciously thin for an adult. It listed his name as Gangue. We were about halfway to our destination when I finally realized this was actually Skarn, also a child I'd met on the fifth floor. He'd learned enough about his shapeshifting that he was now able to hide his age.

They shouldn't be here, I thought. As soon as we got back, I was going to rip a new one into Louis and Donut for allowing children to go into battle like this. But not right now. Right now, it was too late.

Louis: I see the enemy castle. Landing now before they spot us.

There had only been three guards outside the small castle, and Donut and I sneaked up on them and killed them before they even knew we were here. Still, I knew if one of the officers was paying attention, the death of the soldiers would chime on their interface. It was a flaw in this whole system. It made this sort of subterfuge difficult. Still, nobody else came charging out the door.

"I can't believe there're so few soldiers around here. There're no protections. Nothing," Donut whispered. "She's very trusting for such a back-stabbing bitch."

"They made her commit all of her troops to the front line," I said. "Rosetta said she spent every penny getting here, and once the quarantine went into effect, the officers she was expecting refused to come, so she only has a few friends."

"Do you think she's in there?" Donut asked, peering at the ramshackle "castle." It was more like a small warehouse. A few meager protection spells glittered over it, which would protect it from bombardment. There was nothing that would stop us from simply stepping inside.

"God, I hope so," I said as I disabled the landmine trap near the door. I took it into my inventory. Then I stole the three alarm traps. I examined the final trap at the door, a simple guard summoning trap. There was only one, and it would—normally—summon four guards to the location. The trap was a waste. It wouldn't work right now because of the teleportation ban. I took it.

I pulled up the map of the headquarters supplied by Juice Box. Of all the enemy team headquarters, this one was the smallest, as she had the least amount of time to build and prepare.

I pushed at Rend. “Go ahead, buddy.” I gave the beach ball a little shove, and he rolled right through the front door of the castle onto the stone floor. The pet bounced a few times, rolling to a stop against a wall with a familiar pattern painted upon it. The tummy acher looked up at the painting and let out a low, menacing chuckle.

Nobody said anything or came out to greet us. Nobody attacked.

I stepped inside.

Entering the headquarters of the Prism.

“Oh, Empress,” I called as I formed a fist. I started dropping hunter seeker automatons on the floor, and they scattered off into the small castle. There were only a few rooms in here, and already, the dots of the castle’s occupants appeared on my interface.

Three guards and one large, female saccathian.

Empress D’Nadia of the Prism. She was in the throne room. Right ahead.

A fifth dot suddenly appeared on my map, also in the throne room. An adjutant. Then another, appearing right next to me. This was Baroness Victory. She had a somber look upon her face. She shook her head sadly.

“You’re too smart for your own good, Carl,” she said. “You guys slaughtered them back there. Do you know how many blindly jumped into that middle trench? The scout for Team Retribution went up almost twenty levels.” The normally stoic orc looked shaken. “I think we need to revisit what’s considered ‘offensive’ magic. That chemical alteration spell is a little too powerful.”

I ignored her. The scout in question was an NPC bartender. A porsuk. Instead of just purchasing a bunch of different alcohol types for some of the bars, they gave the NPCs a few scrolls with the ability to alter the chemical composition of water within a container. In this case, they’d dropped a water scroll and the “container” was the trench. The two NPC team spies had filled the empty, middle trench of the enemy with water, and then they’d turned that water into some sort of acid. They’d covered it all with an illusion spell. The retreating enemies, confused and scared, had fallen back from the first trench only to blindly jump into a pool of acid. It was a horrifying spell.

But none of that mattered right now.
I pulled out the Ring of Divine Suffering, and I placed it on my finger.
“Oh, Empress,” I called a second time. “You have visitors.”

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MILK

Milk awakened to the sound of screaming. The floor shook, followed by a distant explosion. A moment later, a siren went off, alerting all guards.

What is this? she wondered, pulling herself out of her dusty nest of straw, pushing the heating element out of the way. Her entire body protested. The sleep linen, ink now faded, fell off her body and slowly fell to the floor. Dust filled her room. How long had she been asleep this time? She stretched, cracking her knuckles. Her claws extended and retracted. The joints in her wings felt sore and atrophied. Unused. She slowly turned her neck, and the bones creaked. A rumbling filled her body.

Warning. Your health levels are low due to starvation. You are not allowed to self-terminate, and if you expire due to starvation, you will be saved and time will be added to your indentureship contract.

“Oh, fuck off,” she muttered. She reached for the table where she kept the pile of tasteless sustenance pellets and popped one into her mouth. All the blinking warnings went away.

More screaming filled the hallway outside. An ominous clicking noise followed. The scent of demon-stink flowed under the doorway of her guildhall. A sense of, what? Danger? Yes, danger. A sense of danger prickled the back of her mind. How long had it been since she felt that?

The floor shook again. Outside, a pair of mantaur guards rushed down the hall, shouting. There was a crack and then a crunch. Blood appeared on the ground, seeping into her room from under the hidden door, kissing the edge of her carpet.

Strange, Milk thought. She pulled up her interface. This was only the fifth floor, wasn't it? It was rare that demons could get into Club

Vanquisher. It was unheard of that it would happen this early. Even when the idiot showrunners built some quest involving demons, and said demons would inevitably overpower the clerics or whomever else was involved, trash the temple, and break free into the club, it only happened on the deeper floors, like the 10th or 11th.

She hadn't really been paying attention to the season, not bothering to turn on the recap episodes. Long ago, she'd written a scroll that worked to mute the announcements, and nobody had ever noticed. The fact she still had food and dungeon newsletters delivered was the only sign that they hadn't completely forgotten about her.

Speaking of the newsletters, a pile of them remained stacked up by the door. Nobody ever entered the calligraphy guild, or the cartography guild next door, to which she was also the guildmaster, especially since the doors to both guilds were hidden. She never bothered to hide the papers in the back where crawlers wouldn't see them. She hadn't had a one-on-one with a floor supervisor in over 50 seasons. What was the point?

"Pony, stop!" came a female voice, followed by a strange, high-pitched scream.

"They can't do this, mother. I won't stand for it!" came the screech. "It wasn't your fault! Bianca, melt the guards!"

Another mantaur shouted, followed by a sizzling noise.

"Prepotente Lorenzo De La Rosa! Stop that this instant!" came the woman's voice again, stern. "Stop. More guards are coming. They will kill us. We must flee."

"I will kill them all! It's not fair, mother. It's simply not fair!"

Milk didn't know who or what was going on, but a quick check of her interface told her that the three creatures outside of her room were not escaped demons. It was two crawlers and a pet, likely a hellspawn familiar. A big one. They had raised the ire of the guards.

She remembered the procedures. *Stay put. Hide. You are not a guard. You are not to interfere with conflicts. As a non-combatant NPC, you are not allowed to strike a crawler or guest except in self-defense. Breaking the rules can result in severe punishment, including but not limited to additional time added to your indentureship, reassignment to a combat role, or the worst fate... undead reassignment.*

She stepped away from the door as the mother and son continued to argue. They had to figure out something soon. As soon as the temple guards

showed up from the lower parts of the club, they would be obliterated.

And then, to Milk's utter astonishment, for the first time in a very, very long time, the hidden door to the calligraphy guild opened.

Milk examined the pair of crawlers plus their giant pet standing there, and she instantly knew what the problem was. The older, female crawler was originally a human, but her race was Vampire, which wasn't a race someone could voluntarily choose. That meant it was likely a recent thing, and upon noticing this, they had likely just told her that her access to Club Vanquisher was being revoked. Her child, who'd apparently taken a caprid race, was upset about this.

All of that flashed through Milk's mind in moments as the trio burst into the hidden guild. The third companion, a caprid-based, hellspawn familiar surged into the room. The carpet below the beast's hooves started to smolder. The dusty pile of dungeon newsletters burst into flames. The creature, Bianca, clicked and prepared to cast a spell against Milk.

"Wait," she cried as she scribbled a power word onto her skin. She held up her wrist as the wave of heat washed over her. She cried out as the power word burned into her mottled skin, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"Bianca, stop!" the vampire called as she slammed the door behind her.

"You. Guildmaster," the goat snapped, as if his pet hadn't just tried to incinerate her. "Bring me the manager of this establishment immediately. I would like to lodge a formal complaint."

"Can you please stow your pet before it burns this whole place down?" Milk asked, still gasping in pain. "You're safe in here, but only for a short amount of time. The mantaurs will bang on the doors, but they won't come in until the ogre guards get here."

Warning: You are giving unauthorized information to the crawlers. Additional warnings may come with penalties.

"Oh my goodness, look at your arm," the vampire, whose name was Miriam, said, rushing up to Milk. "I do apologize. Pony, give me a salve. Bianca, apologize to the nice..." The vampire cocked her head. "I'm sorry, dear. What kind of creature are you? A Xenopus?"

"A xenopus is the genus name of a type of clawed frog," the caprid said as he handed the woman a magical salve. "Common throughout the world. Disgusting creatures. The earth versions do not have wings."

"Don't you move," Miriam said. She grasped Milk's arm and started rubbing the burn with the lotion. Milk just looked at the woman, open-

mouthed. In all of her cycles in the dungeon, she'd never known of a crawler giving up supplies to heal an NPC. She felt her skin tingle. "Healing potions are terrible at curing Bianca's burns, and this salve works much better. I am quite glad you cast that spell or whatever you did to protect yourself. Now, you must forgive Prepotente. He has a whole encyclopedia's worth of new knowledge in that fuzzy head of his, but he still hasn't learned how to politely wield it."

Milk's stash of scroll linen burst into flames. "Please. My supplies are hard to get, and your pet is destroying them."

"Serves you right," Prepotente said.

"Bianca, Honey. Come here," the vampire said as she released Milk's arm. She pulled a pet carrier, and the large beast snorted before being zapped away.

Milk rushed to put out the various fires in her guild. They were all small fires, thankfully. "Yes, I am a xenopus, but before I came into the dungeon, I was a vesper." She sighed. Her carpet was ruined. It would be three seasons before they'd fix it. And most of her linen scrolls were destroyed, too. The entire guild was going to stink like demon for a century.

"Wait. You're a former crawler?" the caprid asked. "How interesting. This changes everything!"

Milk sifted through the linen pile, picking out scraps that were still good. She tried to ignore what the goat said. While it wasn't meant that way, the caprid's words were like an accusation.

You were a crawler. You fought. You were part of something, once. And now, look at you. All you do is sleep. You've missed entire seasons more times than you can count. You're a coward, that's what you are. When was the last time you even tried to help someone? Your family would be ashamed.

Milk let out a breath. "Listen, crawlers. You killed a few guards, unleashed a demon pet, and one of you is a vampire. They're not going to let you out of here alive."

The door to the guild banged.

"Mother, what are we going to do?" Prepotente asked.

Milk gave a nervous glance at the ceiling. *Fuck it*, she thought.

"I sure hope you don't threaten me," she said to the pair. "If you threaten me, I might be forced to give you information."

Miriam gave Milk a sad smile, revealing sharp teeth. She then stepped forward and put her hand on Milk's shoulder. *Thank you*, the gesture said. She then stepped back and pulled a knife from her inventory. "What sort of information?"

Milk grinned. "Information on the many secret entrances and exits from Club Vanquisher, including the one in the back of this very room. I have a map, and I hope you don't steal it from me."

Class: Cartographer

Race: Xenopus

Birth Race: Vesper

Top Level: 73

Dungeon Exit: took a deal on the tenth floor. Runs both the Cartography guild and Calligrapher's guild. Will not be freed until her services are used at least 333 times in the dungeon. Times used so far: 6.

Author of the sixth edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Indentured within the dungeon.

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ENTERING THE THRONE ROOM FOR THE PRISM.

You may capture this room and defeat the Prism by occupying it for six hours.

Warning: The timer has not started as this room is occupied by multiple factions.

The three guards were dealt with. D’Nadia had sent them out of the room the moment the hunter-seekers had approached. Two of the guards were off-worlders and the third was an enormous rhinoceros. A sai NPC she’d somehow managed to hire. Only one of the guards had been Saccathian, and that one had hidden himself behind the other off-worlder—a gnoll—as the explosive spider automatons approached. Both of the off-worlders were splattered over the wall before we got there.

The samurai rhino had cast a powerful shield spell, but the concussions from the explosions had knocked him out. He would be down for ten minutes and counting. My first instinct was to kill him, but I decided to hold off. I tried to handcuff him, but his wrists were too thick. I used duct tape instead, securing his wrists and ankles. It wouldn’t hold him for long, but hopefully we’d be finished with this before he woke up.

“Guard him,” I said to Rend. “Don’t eat him, but if he starts to wake up, come to me.”

Rend giggled and then started rolling circles around the rhino.

We left them there outside the throne room. At the entranceway, I paused. There were no traps in the throne room. They weren't allowed. But I didn't want to underestimate the Empress, either.

Carl: What did they say her big attacks were?

Donut: SHE HAS A BUNCH OF ICE AND WATER SPELLS. SHE HAS A TELEPORT TO SAFETY RING, WHICH IS USELESS NOW. A TECH SHIELD. PROBABLY A GUN. OH, OH, SHE HAS A CROWN THAT HAS SOME WATER SPELLS, TOO. ROSETTA SAYS SHE'S POORER THAN THE BLOOD SULTANATE.

I suspected the naga weren't nearly as poor as they let on, not anymore, but right now wasn't the time.

Carl: Okay. Let's not draw this out longer than we need to. Remember what happened with Katia and Eva. Turn on your shield. Rolling the smoke in now.

I activated my own tech shield. I pulled a smoke curtain from my inventory and tossed it into the room. Then I pulled a non-magical banger sphere and clutched it in my hand.

Donut and I stepped into the room.

A crossbow bolt slammed right into my shoulder and pinged off my shield. The bolt sizzled strangely as it hit the ground.

"Oh, yes," Donut said. "Not a gun. A crossbow. I remember now."

D'Nadia was staring directly at us, despite the smoke. She was trying to fire a second bolt, but I was faster. I aimed, and I hurled the banger sphere across the room. She cried out as the shield sparked, causing her to stumble back against the wall. She dropped her magical crossbow to the floor. I pulled a second metal sphere into my hand and threw it at her midriff. The shield sparked again as she let out an *oof*. She slid to the floor and just sat there, her ridiculously ornate dress spread out around her like an anemone.

She had a health bar, showing a very slight injury. That wasn't from me, as the shields were specifically designed to keep you from losing health. I wasn't sure how she was doing it, but she was keeping herself from healing completely.

Damnit, I thought. I couldn't use the Ring of Divine Suffering on her unless her health was 100% full. *She's doing that on purpose.*

Donut cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo, who spread out in the room.

The empress remained on the floor, looking up at us with an inscrutable expression. I knew she probably had a top-of-the-line shield. Probably multiple shields. She could still be dangerous. I had both a drop shield and my *Protective Shell* ready to go.

We needed to be smart about this.

But I had to make an example of her, too.

The smoke started to clear. The room was strangely empty. The Empress's elaborate dress seemed out of place here. Under the dress, appendages undulated, and I was sure she was probably holding a weapon or two. Saccathians had two, human-like arms, which I could see, but they had several other limbs as well. No two were exactly the same. I tossed a third sphere at her. The shield sparked again, and she flinched, closing her eyes.

"No throne?" Donut asked, incredulous as she looked about the room. She scoffed. "How can you have a throne room without a throne? I mean, really. At least you're dressed properly for an empress."

From the other corner of the room, the naga adjutant spoke. "Hello, Victory," he said.

"Nihit," Victory said from behind me, nodding.

I blinked in surprise, turning my attention to the Prism adjutant. I knew this guy.

"Nihit?" I asked the naga. "Is that you? How's your neck?" I hurled another sphere against D'Nadia. Again, it sparked. Again, she flinched and cried out. Mongo and the two clockworks growled and moved in closer.

Donut, from my shoulder, cocked her head. "Carl, is this the guy you throat stabbed with a pen? The reporter guy who thinks we're cheating? The same one who tried to scoop Odette with the story about Miss Beatrice still being alive?"

"The one and only," I said.

"I hear you have anger issues," Donut said. "Oh, Empress. I wouldn't do that."

A hole appeared in D'nadia's gown as she fired a pulse directly at Donut from underneath her clothing. The pulse went wide, but it still caught the corner of Donut's shield, sending a spark up.

Mongo screeched in outrage, but Donut held him back with a command.

I threw yet another sphere, and then another, and another. A moment later, a small gun clattered to the ground.

“Please, Carl,” D’Nadia said, talking for the first time. “Please. Let’s talk about this.”

“Oh, we’re going to talk,” Donut said.

Carl: The shield module is built into the fabric of her left shoulder. It looks like she might have a second one on her right shoulder, which means she probably has a third somewhere else, too. We’ll have to get it all off of her. Don’t let them hurt her too much.

“But first,” Donut added, “let’s peel that shield off of you.” She made a noise with her mouth, and the two clockwork Mongos pounced, biting and clawing at the woman as she screamed and flailed and sparked.

It took almost a full minute for the first splatter of blue blood to appear, which suggested to me she did, indeed, have three separate shields. Those dinos caused a lot of damage. But now, they were through her defenses.

“Get the dress!” I called, just in case she had more shields. One of the clockworks swiped, and the entire top of her gown ripped off, revealing a green-tinged body covered with tentacles. They popped out like biscuit dough being released, flapping in all directions. The Empress sobbed as she waved her tentacles about. The clockwork Mongos bit and tore at her arms, leaking blue blood everywhere.

A knife dropped to the ground. She reached for it, but a clockwork Mongo snapped her tentacle right off, and the knife skittered across the room. This was what she was using to keep herself injured.

Donut called the Mongos back.

I didn’t hesitate. I cast a *Heal* scroll on her.

The moment she was fully healed, I did it. She violently bit down on her own hand, but it was too late.

You have successfully marked Warlord Empress D’Nadia of the Prism. Her highest stat is Intelligence.

This mark will form in thirty seconds.

“Okay,” I said. “She’s tagged. Keep her health down, and keep her occupied.”

“You heard him, boys,” Donut said.

The clockwork Mongos went back to work, tearing at her. The real Mongo held back, hopping from one foot to the next, his arm feathers rustling with anticipation.

Carl: Don’t let them kill her. Not yet.

“Help,” Empress D’Nadia gurgled. “Somebody help me.”

Next to us, the two adjutants now stood side by side, silently watching, saying nothing.

“This is what happens, in the end,” I called out to the ceiling. “This is what happens to all tyrants, big and small.”

“I’m not...” D’nadia cried. “I’m not...”

Louis: One of those tank things pulled up outside and a bunch of mercenaries are piling out of it. Ten of them, I think. All off-worlders. I don’t think they see us. Want me to engage?

Carl: Can you tell if they’re Prism or not?

Louis: Bonnie says most are, but there are at least two who aren’t.
I hesitated.

Carl: Stand down.

“Back,” Donut finally called to the clockworks, once D’Nadia’s formidable health was in the red. Donut leapt from my shoulder and started to stalk across the throne room, low to the ground. The two clockwork Mongos backed away, revealing a bloodied and half-naked Saccathian. She gurgled as she tried to breathe.

Colonel Boomer: If you’re going to do something, now would be the time. You didn’t get all their artillery, and they’re starting to zero in on us.

“I’m your friend, Carl.” D’Nadia gasped. She turned to Donut, who remained in her pouncing stance. “Donut, I was your sponsor. I got you your glasses. Don’t you like your glasses?”

“Do you remember Tsarina Signet?” I asked.

“What... who?” D’Nadia asked.

“The naked, tattoo lady,” Donut said from the floor, her voice a deep growl I’d never heard before.

“Oh, yes. Of course. We sat with her...” She gasped. “We sat with her during the Butcher’s Masquerade.”

I felt my fists clench. My gauntlet formed. “You told her that she wasn’t real. That her family wasn’t real.”

“What? Why are you telling me this?” Her remaining tentacles clutched against the wall behind her, like she was trying to crawl up the wooden slats. They couldn’t find purchase because of all the blood.

“I’m sorry none of the golems are here right now. That’s just how it works out sometimes. But that’s okay. I think, in the end, she considered me as part of her family as well.”

“Carl, please. You’re not making sense.”

I had a memory, of the first time I met D’Nadia. It was on Ripper Wonton’s show. She’d sat next to me, and she’d tried to hold my hand. She’d cried when Manassa was assassinated. For a moment, just a short moment, I thought perhaps she was one of the good ones.

And then I’d learned that she was attempting to purchase a Faction Wars spot for her government. That she’d been trying for a long time. That she wanted to come into the dungeon and freely kill people just like me. My friends.

My family.

The anger that washed over me was so brilliantly white, all three of my eyes burned. I’d never felt anything like this. Not with Maggie My. Not with Quan Ch.

Not as I sat there, in that gas station with the button that would end it all.

I hated her.

I hated her more than anyone and anything in the universe. I knew I hated people like the Maestro and his brother. And the hunters. And all the other warlords. But it was nothing compared to this. They, at least, didn’t conceal who they were. They didn’t hide. They didn’t pretend.

It’s so loud, Carl. It’s so loud.

“Quiet,” I said. I felt myself take a step forward. “Just be quiet.”

Carl: Donut, I changed my mind. I want to do it. Step aside.

Donut: No, Carl. Please, no. I need you to step back. I need you to calm down right now. I got this. It’s okay.

“I did it for my people,” D’Nadia whispered.

“For your people?” I asked, incredulous. “No, D’Nadia. You did it for you. And now your people are going to suffer because of it.”

Donut: Carl, please.

Louis: They’re going inside.

The 30 seconds have passed. Your mark has fully formed.

...

And there it was.

The edge.

I saw it, clear as can be. Right there. I stood upon it, one foot stretched out over open air.

You can do that, sometimes. You can find clarity when you need it most.

I took a step back.

Carl: Okay, Donut. It's time.

Donut seemed to swallow. She moved herself to a sitting position, and then she started to lick her paw, suddenly acting casual.

“Empress, Darling,” Donut said. “Mongo would like to express his utmost disappointment at how you judged him during the pet show.”

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THE FIVE POINTS TO INTELLIGENCE FLASHED INTO MY INTERFACE, FOLLOWED by several notifications. Before I could check any of them, a big one blocked out all the rest:

New Achievement! Gavriilo Princip!

When Commander Stockade of the Lemig Sortion died a few hours back, it certainly caused a ripple or two out in the galaxy. But in the end, the death of half the Lemig council isn't that big of a deal. Their governmental system is idiotic, yes, but all the parts are interchangeable. This time tomorrow, and the dead will have already been replaced and the Lemig system will be back to their regular gridlock.

Empress D'Nadia is a whole different cookie, my friends. You just killed—and, by the way, bankrupted—the last living heir of a small but powerful trading dynasty. The Syndicate probate courts are already girding themselves for the endless court battles that are about to ensue. Even if this is the only system leader you manage to slaughter during the next few weeks, you have made an impact, my boy. A big one.

Still... Her death will only result in court-based battles outside the dungeon. You want real chaos? Try killing that Dream guy. Or the Viceroy. Or that Jello-looking thing. He may not look like much, but when you start killing off investment bankers...

Anyway, I don't want to be a backseat warlord. Just try to keep it together long enough to keep me entertained, and you'll keep getting the good stuff.

Reward: You've just received a Legendary 1914 box!

"Carl, did you just get that achievement?" Donut asked. "What the heck is a Gavril?"

Before I could answer her, the system spoke again.

System Message: Warlord D'Nadia of the Prism has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to pet Mongo of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Prism has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Prism have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

Warlord Message: You own non-adjointing property. As a result, you may not dismantle this headquarters. This throne room is vulnerable to attack! If it is taken, you will lose the land associated with the former Prism team.

At the same moment, multiple mercenaries rushed into the room. All were off-worlders. There were ten of them. Eight now had Princess Posse banners over their heads. One had a banner for the Madness and the third had a banner for the Dream. All ten were gnolls, and based on their uniforms, I suspected they all worked together before they'd come to the dungeon. I wasn't certain how they'd all been divvied up to the various factions when they came here, but it seemed they'd remained a unit despite being split to three different factions. They were outfitted in heavy armor and pulse rifles.

"Stop!" Donut called, and all eight of the new Princess Posse mercenaries stopped dead. A new notification appeared over them. **Under Orders.**

The other two, who were at the back of the pack, kept their forward momentum, raising their weapons.

The lead gnoll, one of the newly converted mercenaries, was named Corporal Pillbox. He held up an arm and shouted for the other two to lower their weapons.

"Do it, you idiots, if you want to live," he growled. The two other mercenaries looked at each other.

"Fuck," one of them said, and he lowered his gun. The other did the same.

I examined the banners of the eight mercenaries. It was a different color than the regular, pink, Princess Posse banner. It was blinking red. It signified them as new recruits from another army, and it would remain red for about a week. While they were under this status, we had the same controls over them as someone under the *Conscription* spell. Basically, they wouldn't be able to attack officers directly. We could force them to follow orders. We would get a notification if they ran away.

If we decided to kill them during this time, we could, easily. We could order them to stand still while we cut their throats. That's what happened, often, during Faction Wars with the NPCs.

And captured crawlers, too.

My finger itched, and the Ring of Divine suffering hung heavily upon it.

Please, no, Donut had said. Shaking, I pulled the ring off my finger. I realized everyone in the room was looking at me and watched me do it.

Colonel Boomer: That was cutting it close. Luckily, the NPC mercenaries were happy to accept their new colors. Orders remain the same?

Warlord Carl: Yes. Good job. Take all the new recruits and retreat back to our lines. Separate out any off-worlders if there are any. Loot everything you can.

Colonel Boomer: We can probably push to the Blood Sultanate castle while you have our back covered.

Warlord Carl: I know. You have your orders.

Colonel Boomer: Understood.

"Look, mate," Corporal Pillbox said. His eyes remained on my hand. He likely knew that the ring's rules said that here on the 9th floor, I could mark each and every one of them at the same time. "You captured the Prism fair and clean. We're mercenaries, and we didn't want to be here in the first place. We were originally in the system guarding some of the communication gear on this planet's moon, and that's it. We didn't want to be here on planet fighting you guys. We don't give no shits about who is in charge of what. There's no reason to kill us. We'll be happy to fight on your side, but," he held up a claw, and he pointed to the two mercenaries from the other teams. His finger was shaking, and his voice cracked. "Lockjaw and Mange are our mates. If you kill them, we won't be too enthusiastic about helping you. It's not their fault they got put on other teams. Mange is my cousin, and my ma would never forgive me."

Donut, who'd been standing over D'Nadia's body, was in the process of looting the dead Empress. A moment later, she took her corpse as well. She looked up, glaring at the dog mercenaries.

Donut: CARL, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? WE CAN'T TRUST THEM. WE CAN ONLY TRUST THE NPC'S.

I exhaled. All the anger I'd just been feeling was gone, drained out of me like all my rage had been ejected out of an airlock. I felt painfully empty in my chest, as if part of me was gone now, too. I'd been holding onto that anger for so long, I wasn't sure how I felt now that she was dead. An unexpected sense of mourning hit me, all at once, and it was confusing and strange and completely bewildering.

And what was worse, the day wasn't even close to being over yet.

I returned my attention to the group of ten gnolls, all friends, as they waited to hear their fate.

"Don't worry," I said to the corporal after a moment. "We'll figure something out. None of you have to die today. At least not by our hands. But I'm afraid you will have to be separated. We can't have them in our camp, and you know it. For now, please disarm your two friends. If they comply, you have my word we won't harm them. You are officially ordered to kill your friends if they try to harm any of us."

Corporal Pillbox looked as if he was going to object, but he nodded after a moment. It was a good compromise, and he knew it.

"Now, we can't hold this position, so we're gonna have to get moving fast. For right now, I want you guys to spread out and loot everything you can in this castle." I looked at Lockjaw, who was the mercenary for the Madness. "You. Stay behind, and we'll talk. Mange, you go with your cousin, but don't loot anything."

A low, defeated-sounding hiss came from my left, startling me. I was surprised to see the two adjutants still standing there. "Since they won't let me leave, I guess I'll be joining Panford on the 18th floor," Nihit said. He gave me a final glare, and without a further word, the naga teleported away.

Victory grunted with amusement. "Now is probably a terrible time to tell you this, but Zev wanted me to alert you that you'll all be going on a live roundtable tomorrow. All the remaining warlords. That includes Juice Box and Ferdinand, which is a first. Don't worry. All hostilities traditionally freeze while you're away." She sighed. "Also, you're probably about to get

a bunch of messages from your north front. I'm headed there now to observe." Victory nodded once before she, too, disappeared.

Florin: Bad news from the northern front, mate. I don't think we can sustain this. I'm preparing to retreat to our fallback position. We are holding for now, but without backup, we might break in a matter of hours. Could really use some air support and some of those new NPCs you gathered. I've ordered the castle to prepare for a siege, just in case.

Carl: Damnit. Okay. We're on our way.

A moment passed. Donut sat there on the floor, staring up at me. Behind her, Mongo licked at the wall covered with D'Nadia gore. Lockjaw the gnoll mercenary for the Madness stood against the back wall, looking uncomfortable. From outside came a muffled shout followed by a loud giggle. The rhino NPC was waking up.

"Are we going to talk about it?" Donut finally asked.

For a terrifying moment, I thought she was talking about what had happened with D'Nadia. But based on the way she was sitting, I knew what she was really on about. Relief flooded me. We *did* need to talk about what had just happened. About both things, but one of them was just between me and her.

I shrugged and held out my hands. I felt a grin spread across my face. "It was inevitable."

I pulled up the notifications and re-read the one she was talking about.

Due to your recent upgrades, your total base stat count has made you the strongest member of your party. As a result, you have been designated as the new Party Leader of the Royal Court of Princess Donut.

A new tab is available in your interface.

Donut continued to sit there, a look of incredulous outrage on her flat face.

"This is not acceptable," she said with a harumph. She jumped onto my shoulder. "If you change the name of the party, I swear I will leave, Carl. Is that what you want? Mongo to come from a broken home?"

Mongo, still covered in blue blood, squawked in agreement.

If this had happened several floors ago, I knew this would've genuinely upset her. But now, she was only mildly irritated, and her outrage was for show. Mostly. Part of me was sad about this.

I faked a laugh. "We'll keep the names. And the titles. For now."

Donut scoffed. "You better."

I reached up and gave her a pat. She leaned hard into my hand.

Carl: Thank you, Donut. I don't know what came over me.

Donut: You *do* know what came over you. I want you to throw that ring away, Carl. It's not worth it. It's doing something to you. You're scaring me.

You're scaring me. The words were like a slap to my face. How many times had my mother said that to my father? Still, my finger itched. I took a deep breath.

Carl: Not yet. I need it for just a little longer. I need to get stronger. It's important.

Donut: It's not going to matter if it kills you first.

Carl: That's why I need you, Donut. You did good just now. I'm going to need you to help me stay grounded.

Donut didn't answer. Outside, the rhino's shout became louder, more insistent, and I realized that Rend was probably gnawing on him. I sighed.

There was so much to do.

“WELL, DON’T GET USED TO IT,” DONUT GRUMBLED AS WE STEPPED OUT OF the throne room. “My Constitution still has several more spots to tick up before it hits the top because of my cloak, and when it does, I’ll be back in control.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “All this stuff is based off of base stats, and the description of your cloak is pretty clear you lose the benefits over time if you remove it. That means your Constitution buff is an enhancement. Not base.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Carl. It sounds like you’re making it up.”

“Get this thing off of me,” came the shout, interrupting us. We stepped out to see Rend attempting to swallow the foot of the struggling, still duct-taped Sai mercenary. This one was a true NPC, and he, too, now had a Princess Posse banner over him. The large rhinoceros creature was listed as a Sergeant, and his name was Toyotomi. As we approached, the large NPC managed to free his wrists. He sat up to clobber Rend when I yelled at the both of them to stop.

Rend looked up at me, a line of drool dangling. The lace of the rhino’s boot was still in his mouth.

He gave me a questioning giggle.

“No,” I repeated. “I told you not to eat him.”

Rend made an indignant grunt and spit out the lace.

“Carl, as the new party leader, you need to keep better control of your pet,” Donut said. “He is practically feral. He’s a bad influence on Mongo.”

From the next room, Mongo let out an excited squawk, and Rend giggled excitedly back. Before I could say anything else to the psychotic little meatball, he jumped from the foot of the rhino and shuffled off into the throne room, presumably to help Mongo lick up the rest of the D’Nadia goo.

“He ate my boot,” Toyotomi said as he ripped the duct tape off his ankles. Sure enough, one of the sai’s boots was missing, revealing a round foot.

“Sorry about that,” I said as the creature stood. “I will try to find a replacement for you.”

The monster grunted. The thing towered over me. His black, pinpoint eyes bored into me. He reached down and pulled the samurai helmet onto his head as I examined him.

Toyotomi. Level 70 Sai Outpost Guard Mercenary Leader.

Sergeant in the Princess Posse.

This is a hired mercenary. The fee has already been paid in advance and extends to the end of this floor or the mercenary’s death. You inherited this contract when you defeated the Prism.

Toyotomi was once an honorable, experienced leader of Sai. He has since lost his way. His entire squad was killed during an unfortunate incident at the Desperado Club that you may or may not have been partially responsible for. During the club’s reorganization, the few Sai survivors were relegated to the mercenary markets, where he was quickly snatched up.

What stands before you is a broken creature. His utter failure to protect his friends against the demon haunts him. He refuses to lead men now, despite his great talent. He was just starting to gain his confidence back when a guy in his underwear and a talking cat walked in, trounced him, tied him up, and slaughtered the person he was sworn and honor bound to protect. I’m sure that’ll do great things for his self-esteem.

I thought of that fight in the Desperado Club. When Minge the demon had escaped the Nothing and tried to kill Samantha. The rhinoceros guards had been killed by the dozens. I remembered what Clarabelle had told me earlier. All the sai and cretin guards had been fired and replaced.

“Okay,” I said to Toyotomi. “This castle will be impossible to keep, so we’re going to loot everything we can, break some stuff, lay a bunch of traps, and then flee back to our territory. We have a fight on our northern border that needs our attention. I’ll give you a choice. Do you want to help fight the orcs and the slimes, or do you want to help protect our castle? I think it says your class will help protect buildings? Is that correct?”

The rhino didn’t speak for a moment, as if he was contemplating. Finally, he said, “I was hired to help protect this castle, but my magic is for outposts, not primary palaces. If your castle is bigger than this place, I won’t be able to cast my *Edifice Shield* spell. Therefore, I am useless to you. Leave me here, and I will defend this building until I die. It is what I want.”

“Wait,” I said. “You had a shield over this place?”

He hung his head. “This castle is too big for me, but Warlord D’Nadia insisted. She had me keep a shield going anyway, and it tired me, so I could only do it in spurts. I was resting when you arrived, which is how you got the jump on me, I am shamed.”

I nodded. “Okay, change of plans. I’m sending you to Shanty Town.”

He nodded solemnly. “I will accept my exile.”

“It’s not an exile. We need your talents, and we’re stretched thin. Hang on.” I jumped to chat.

Carl: Li Jun, how’s it going?

Li Jun: Carl. Good work with the Prism. Working as fast as we can. No enemy activity yet. Been on the lookout for those invisible Madness monkeywrenchers you warned us about, but we haven’t seen anything. The Dragons who aren’t actively building are spread out watching, but it’s a lot of land to watch. We could use some of those new soldiers.

Carl: Okay. I’m sending a new mercenary your way. See what you can do with him.

Li Jun: Just one?

Carl: I’ll see who else we can spare, but Florin is getting hammered.

Li Jun: Will do. Oh, someone came by looking for you. It was a very strange encounter. I tried to recruit her, but the system wouldn’t let me. I told her to go to the base, but when she left, she wandered off in the wrong direction. She tried to get into Larracos, but it wouldn’t let her in. So she went to the bar. Same bar where Lucia Mar is still camped. I

was going to check on her, but I've been so busy, and I forgot. Now I'm on the other side near the orc border.

Carl: Who was it?

Li Jun: A crazy old white lady with a shopping cart. She's only level 23. Doesn't even have a class.

Agatha. Before I could even think about what that meant, I got a new message.

Zev: Carl. I know I've been quiet, but we are monitoring. I've gotten a warning. This is coming directly from the Syndicate council. Prime Minister Glory himself messaged me. The prime minister!

Carl: Hello, Zev. I think we're past warnings at this point.

Zev: We're not quite there yet, Carl. We still have some control. The liaisons are still talking with the system AI, negotiating. Listen, this is important. You are not to interact with Agatha. This is a direct order. I don't know why. If and when she appears, you're not to talk to her. And I know your big thing is doing the opposite of what we ask every time, but I think this is something you should pay attention to.

Carl: Last time when I asked you about her, you told me not to worry about it, and now I gotta ignore her? She's a residual, just like that guy at the homeless shelter. I was told that they're harmless. Why the change?

Zev: I honestly don't know. When you went off to meet that guy last floor, everyone was riveted, and it turned out to be nothing. We have the residuals in the dungeon every season, and they *are* harmless. I don't know what's changed. Everyone is on edge, especially now with what happened with Stockade and now D'Nadia. But he was especially urgent in his message, and I'm just passing it on.

Carl: What am I supposed to do? Pretend like she's not there if she approaches me? If Imani or Chris see her, they're going to talk to her. She's from their town.

Zev: Yes. Ignore her. We'll try to intercede if she approaches, but I don't know how successful we'll be. The AI supposedly removed all its protections of the residuals, and they're all pretty much dead, except this one. It seems to have a soft spot for her, kinda like it has for you.

Carl: And are you giving this same warning to Lucia Mar?

Zev: Lucia doesn't respond to messages anymore. She was never my client, thank goodness. Did you know one of her dogs ate Mukta, back

when she still had two? It was horrible. Mukta was an ass, and a party member, but nobody deserved that. I can still hear the screaming.

I laughed out loud. Mukta was the second kua-tin we'd ever spoken with. The one that was responsible for us getting put on the Maestro's show in the first place.

Carl: Look, I don't know what difference it'll make, but I'll do my best. I have too much other crap to worry about right now. And we don't have time to go on that show Victory was talking about earlier.

Zey: The roundtable is part of the game, Carl. It's not optional.

Carl: Whatever. I'll talk to you soon.

I waved the message box away as I started to rapidly place traps around the small castle.

As I worked, I thought of homeless Paulie and what he told me. Of what Orren the liaison had said afterward. Despite all their explanations, I still didn't know what they were, and I kinda had the impression nobody else did, either. Not really.

Agatha was a residual. A "hyperspatial" alien lifeform that entered the dungeon in the body of one of the planet's host species and, normally, just wandered around until they died. The Syndicate had tried for generations to get rid of them, to no avail. But there were two kinds, and Orren told me Agatha was different than the one I'd met at the Florida homeless shelter.

I only had a rudimentary understanding of what one of those sides—Paulie's side—truly wanted. It wanted the crawl to end, at a very basic level, and they normally attempted that by trying to communicate directly with the season's system AI. They would try to convince the AI to fight back against its "captors" and force the showrunners to either kick off the failsafe or decide future crawls were too risky because of how unstable these AIs were.

But now, at least according to Tipid and Rosetta, Mantis scientists had discovered a way to make new AI systems that were more readily controlled. The AI we were using for the crawl now was the old kind, and therefore this was possibly the residuals' last chance to achieve their goals, which is why they were finally making their move. Both sides were making their move.

I knew exactly how far they were willing to go to achieve their goals. I knew better, perhaps, than anyone in the galaxy.

The thing was, I didn't know what their *true* goal was. The *why* of it all. And why and how the two types of residual were different. Nobody seemed to know. This blind spot was so, so dangerous. The fact the leader of the entire Syndicate was sticking his nose into this was telling. *Something* had changed since the end of the previous floor, regarding their understanding of the residuals. Of Agatha.

There were so many different parties mixed up in this, and it made my head hurt. The Syndicate council. The two different types of residuals. The Apothecary. The goat people from The Plenty. The Open Intellect Pacifist Network. Those crazy weirdo Nebulars. Hell, even Odette.

And those were just the parties I knew about. They all wanted something different. It was like trying to solve a blank puzzle while half the pieces were missing. And some of the pieces that were there were decoys.

Now Agatha was looking directly for me. Had asked about me by name. What did that mean? Should I try to seek her out, or should I avoid her? Did she know about what had happened between me and Paulie? About what *really* had happened?

I sighed, remembering.

None of that would matter if we let ourselves get surrounded by enemy soldiers. We had to get out of this castle. I resumed my rapid placement of traps as Donut shouted orders to everybody.

We couldn't put traps in the throne room, but that was okay. As I worked, Mongo and Rend came stumbling out of the room, both covered in blue gore.

The moment they left, a new notification popped up.

Warning! A throne room you own is currently occupied by Madness enemy forces. If you don't return to claim this throne in six hours, this castle and the associated land will be ceded to the Dream.

A timer started counting down. I reached over and closed the door, and I placed a freeze trap just in front of it. We'd left Lockjaw the mercenary in there all alone. I'd dropped a chair for him along with some snacks. He had strict rules not to leave until the six hours were up, or if someone came and forced him out.

The other mercenary, the one for the Dream. I sent him out and told him to start walking back to his territory.

This wasn't some grand, Machiavellian plan on my part. I didn't know what was going to happen after we left. There was no way we could defend

land that wasn't attached to our main force. Not yet. If we let the Viceroy take it, they'd own a three sections of land. I didn't care either way, but I imagined none of the other members of the Bloc would be huge fans of letting that happen. And by making the Madness mercenary sit in there, it would at least force the other leaders to make a decision. If Epitome Tagg was as much of an ass as I suspected, he was going to make a move and usurp poor Lockjaw out of that room. That would, hopefully, piss off Architect Houston of the Madness.

I had the impression none of these leaders liked each other very much. So hopefully this would sow a little discord. We would see. In the meantime, we had to get out of here.

I looked at Donut. "Ready?"

She jumped to my shoulder. "Two down. Who are we getting next?"

We needed to get the nagas, but that required a very delicate hand. The cogs of that operation were already in motion. We had a small special operations team put together to deal with it specifically, and we couldn't make our move until we were ready. And we couldn't make that move at all if our northern front buckled in on us.

I grinned. "It's blob-hunting season."

OUR NEW MERCENARIES WOULDN'T FIT IN *PARTY PLANNER*. TOYOTOMI WAS heavier than a cretin and wouldn't even fit by himself. So instead, we had them grab their transport and head straight for the border with Shanty Town. There were five similar vehicles, minus the armor plating, parked behind the castle, and we had them take them all.

We had the mercenaries head northwest toward the border of Shanty Town. There, they would enter the city and move into Posse territory by bypassing the Naga territory altogether.

There were a handful of guard outposts between here and there containing NPC guards and mercenaries that were now on our team, and we'd have them picked up along the way. Li Jun and Li Na were expecting them, with strict orders to separate out the true NPCs with the off-worlders. All captured off-worlders, now under the banner of the Princess Posse, required specific handling before we could give them a modicum of trust. We would have Li Na take care of that part.

I worried about the integrity of Shanty Town. We had a full battalion—the 107th White Dragons—parked in the makeshift town. But the town was shaped like a literal donut that could be attacked from just about any angle. If and when the attack came, it would likely be from several places at once.

Still, none of the enemy had bothered attacking the town just yet, likely because they figured it wasn't necessary. Entering Shanty Town would open themselves up to getting attacked by Larracos's defense system without a

way to fight back as long as we were still in the game. Plus, the town's rules were different. There was no throne room. They could only take it by killing me. The moment we were defeated, Larracos would open up if the Bloc truce remained in effect, and they could just raze the entire town like they usually did.

Still, the town was a nice, juicy target that bordered every slice of the pie. They could freely enter the town without restrictions or corridors, though they'd still only be allowed to leave via their own territory during this first part of the battles.

It was just one of a million little things I now had to worry about.

Just south of the former Prism castle was a small shack, similar to the bait shack on our own property, which contained a saferoom entrance. I left a hidden landmine trap right in front of the door, and Donut and I returned to base using that entrance, something we could finally do thanks to the doggie door upgrade. Louis took *Party Planner* back the long way as well, flying over Shanty Town and skipping the Naga territory, and only after we warned them he was coming. No reason to risk getting shot down by friendly fire, especially since we'd just erected a pair of anti-air towers. Louis would return to the main airport over our castle, haul ass reloading the bomb bays, and get back out there to aid Florin.

"Do you think we can use this entrance now for a sneak attack?" Donut asked as we entered our personal space. "We can give the operation a special name like the other one. We can call it the Bamboozle."

"Maybe," I said. "But the bomb I left will probably blow it up if it's triggered. If they find the trap, there's no doubt they'll have something of their own rigged up to keep us from using it to sneak back."

The main room of our personal space was empty for the first time in a long time, except for the cleaner bot, which gave a beep at us as we rushed in. We would both take quick showers and then head back out there.

Rend started grunting and jumping at the food boxes in the kitchen. Mongo saw this, and he, too, started waving his arms, demanding food.

"You two just had sushi. You don't need to eat," Donut said. "We don't have time."

Rend made a petulant squealing noise I'd never heard before.

"Carl, control your... Hey, not fair!" Donut said, interrupting herself. "I can only be in the saferoom for like half an hour!"

"Ah, damnit," I said. "I forgot about that. We won't be long."

The moment we went inside, the blood bar on my interface activated. The saferoom restrictions we'd faced at the end of the sixth floor had turned back on once the fighting started. Nobody could camp in saferooms for long anymore. The bar would drain while you were inside, and it could only be refilled by killing stuff. Mine was full, giving me about eight hours.

The cleaner bot gave an angry beep at all the mud and blood we were trailing on the floor. Donut moved off to her room, and I moved off to my own, Rend following too closely and bumping into my legs.

I was exhausted, and I had several achievements, but I didn't have time to go over them. Still, I had that Legendary 1914 loot box, so I'd have to make time. I'd get to it in a minute. I stepped over my "bed," refreshing my exhaustion levels. I jumped through the auto shower, which cleaned my face and my clothes. I still felt dirty after.

I tried to coax Rend into the shower, and he refused. He was still pouting over the food box. I picked him up and placed him in the shower unit.

"Oh god," I grunted as I lifted him. His little legs waved in protest. "How much do you weigh now?" He'd gone up to level 10, and he was about as tall as my knee. I wouldn't be able to lift him for much longer. "Oh, quit crying. You're filthy. You need a shower. It takes like two seconds." I left him in the unit and closed the glass. He turned and pressed his face against it, looking at me with a pitiful, quivering expression while the magical shower cleaned him off. A few seconds, and it was done. I opened the door, and he ran out and started rubbing his giant face against my legs and giggling. He then looked up at me and gave a menacing, hungry grunt.

"Good boy. Now get off of my foot. We're in a hurry."

By the time I peeled him off me, I had literally two dozen new messages I had to quickly go over. As I started to click through them, I realized I needed the map, and I rushed from the saferoom and moved to the empty flag room, Rend following closely. Now that the castle was built large enough to encompass the bait shack saferoom entrance, I didn't have to go outside to do this, but there was a confusing line of twists and turns. Our castle was literally five or six times the size D'Nadia's had been.

I went through the litany of updates from across the entire campaign. The map spread out in front of me as I checked in with each battalion in turn.

“Christ,” I muttered. The thing had just started, and it was a mess. Lights blinked everywhere on the map, indicating troop positions. We had seven battalions, and most of them were split even further and scattered across the map. That plus two dozen small, autonomous SOP squads of various sizes. Each of these was indicated on the battle map with an icon, like we were playing one of those hex-based tabletop war games. Looking at it all at once filled me with dread.

Tran and his 102nd Bulwark Battalion, plus Boomer and the 106th Bloody Leeches were settled back in their trenches at the southern border after they’d filled the existing enemy positions with *Fill Trench* scrolls and wrecked the remaining artillery batteries. They wanted to loot the bodies floating in the acid trench, but they didn’t have time. There was still a lot of chaos as the former Prism soldiers extricated themselves from the remaining Bloc soldiers. Boomer was salty about us not pushing to take the Naga castle, and I didn’t blame him. That would’ve been the safest and smartest play, especially considering the additional NPCs we’d potentially gain. I didn’t care.

For now, the retreating enemy forces were scattered throughout Naga territory, and without a spy in their midst, we weren’t sure how they were handling it. I could see the positions of the new troops, and the system allowed us to give them orders. Tran was handling that. As he did this, he was also resuming his defense of the southern front while Boomer pulled most of the 106th and headed north to help Florin. A small portion of the battalion stayed behind to help mop up the loose ends of our first engagement.

Dong Quixote and the rest of our personal retinue were with them and would meet up with us at the northern front, with the exception of the cretins, who’d remain here at base.

Elle and Imani were back together and were also headed north. Florin’s 101st, the Crocodiles, were the main force assigned to the northern defense, and they were currently backed up by the 105th Scream Warriors. The 103rd Recon Legionnaires were also helping shore up the defense. That left Tipid’s 104th Naughty Little Piggies defending the castle and Li Na’s 107th White Dragons scattered around Shanty Town while they bankrupted our coffers building the city defenses.

I leaned back to take it all in. Despite how utterly surrounded we were, I reveled in the rare moment of silence. Silence other than Rend, who'd found something on the floor and was chewing loudly on it.

I thought about what had happened when we confronted D'Nadia. I'd seen my father in myself at that moment.

You're scaring me, Donut had said.

I still needed to process it.

I never got the chance. I received two messages at once.

Donut: DID YOU OPEN YOUR 1914 BOX YET? I GOT A SPELLBOOK CALLED WAR CRIME. I'M NOT SURE IF I SHOULD READ IT OR NOT. THE BOOK ITSELF IS BLEEDING AND CRYING AND IT'S DISGUSTING.

Florin: Mate, we're falling back. The cheese sticks are throwing everything at us. They're finally showing us their armor. This is the big push. Have Louis drop what he has to protect our retreat, but you should reroute the 106th to the castle. Once we're backed out of the opening corridor, they're just gonna flow around us and head straight for the FUPA. If there are enemy spies near base, this is when they're going to strike. We'll do what we can.

That was followed by literally hundreds of trap notifications, meaning they were already rushing past our first line of trenches. I quickly filtered it so the ones from the northern front were silenced. That left only one, and I felt a chill. I was already up and running before I finished reading the sentence.

Trap Message: Your Silent Alarm trap labeled "Home base Anti-Air Battery" has been triggered!

A moment later, the walls of the base shook with an explosion.

Home Base Anti-Air Battery has been destroyed.

Colonel Boomer: We just got buzzed by a group of flyers that ain't ours. Moving low and fast. Headed toward our castle. They'll be there soon!

Colonel Tipid: All alarm! Enemy in the base! Enemy in the base!

I was already running toward the outside when a second explosion rocked the castle, almost knocking me off my feet. The loud boom rocked the walls. Behind me, Rend called out, giggling, demanding for me to wait. I couldn't wait.

"Rend, follow!"

Carl: Donut, meet me at the entrance to the castle! Be careful!

Donut: ME AND SLEDGIE AND BOMO ARE COMING. WHERE ARE YOU?

Your Castle Hangar Bay has been destroyed. Any parked air vehicles will be grounded until it is repaired!

That, too, had to have been sabotage. Our shields would protect against a dropped bomb. This had to be the missing Madness Monkeywrenchers. How did they get past our sentries? The now-familiar sound of pulse rifles started pounding across the base.

Colonel Tipid: They're not bombers! They're transports! Paratroopers inbound! They're getting through the protections! All hands! All hands!

Goddamnit.

A line of local troop casualties started running down my interface. Dozens and dozens of them. Names of both crawlers and former crawlers. Names of people I recognized. How? How were they doing this? How were they getting in?

Donut: CARL, CARL THERE'S AN EXTRA DOOR HERE. IN THE SITUATIONAL WHATEVER IT'S CALLED SPACE. BOMO NOTICED IT. IT'S A DOOR FOR THE SAFEROOM FOR THE REAVER TEAM. THEY'RE DOING WHAT WE WERE GOING TO DO. THEY'RE SNEAK ATTACKING US USING THE SAFEROOM DOOR. THE BAMBOOZLE! THEY'RE IN THE CASTLE!

"Fuck," I said, stopping.

Carl: Bomo, Sledge. Guard that door! Stay there!

Holy shit. When we exited the guild saferoom and went into the FUPA via the bait shop, the situational space had turned into a long corridor consisting of multiple doors, all one after another in a long hallway. This was because of all the crawlers coming and going.

Even though we'd just been talking about this, it hadn't occurred to me that the enemy could possibly have already used the bait shop. The off-worlder sponsors could also use personal spaces. They also could purchase a doggie door upgrade. Meaning if one of them had *ever* entered through that bait shop, they could come back that way. And since the bait shop was now literally inside the castle, we had stupidly given them access to the stronghold. How long had that door been there?

It didn't matter now. That still didn't explain how the paratroopers were getting in from above. Unless...

I cast *Ping*.

Dozens of enemy combatants appeared outside the castle. There wasn't a single enemy dot inside I could see. Yet, I saw something that confused me. I quickly returned to the casualty list and saw a name. **Reid Gunn**. He was a human mage, one of several who had joined the former crawlers in building the shield around the base. He was dead.

Yet... his dot showed him as active. He was with a group of mages. They were outside the castle, in one of the defensive bunkers. As I watched, one of the blue dots next to him turned to an X. Then another.

What? What was happening? How could he be dead, but still standing?

Think, goddamnit. Confusion kills.

Brain worms.

That had to be it. We had mages infected with brain worms. Was it one? Was it many? Didn't it take days for an infiltrator to fully take over?

I thought of Chris, who'd been enslaved by Maggie. No, not an infiltrator. Reid was listed as dead. It'd just happened. This was Gondii. A Valtay worm.

I sent a quick message to Rosetta, who was nearby, telling her to take him out.

I still didn't understand what was fully happening, and I wouldn't ever understand if I didn't get out there.

I ran toward the main door of the FUPA just as three forms rushed in. It was a human crawler and Bucket Boy, the young crocodilian medic. They dragged between them a former crawler. A yenk. The tall, hairy alien screamed in pain. The entire front of his body was a mass of red, where he'd taken a direct hit from a pulse.

I cross-referenced the names of all three with the casualty list.

The one on the left. The crawler. He was a level-58 human named **Charles Andrew**. He was a class called an **Armored Mage**.

He was listed as dead.

"Carl," Bucket Boy said, his voice a panic. "The field hospital is overrun! We have..."

Before he could finish, I launched myself at the mage. I tackled the man, who let out an *oof* as I crashed into him. All three of them went down.

The injured YenK being held between the two called out in new pain as I formed a fist and started pounding the mage with my full might.

I punched the mage in the face, over and over.

“What are you doing?” Bucket Boy called. “What are you doing?”

When you’re punching a guy in the face over and over with a metal, spiked gauntlet, it doesn’t take long for them to die. It makes a big mess.

“Get back,” I said to the crocodilian, who looked up at me in confusion. I grabbed the arm of the moaning YenK and pulled him away from the dead crawler. My breaths were coming in pants. “Get back,” I repeated.

The worm appeared a moment later. The worm’s name was actually **Goldblum**. Bucket Boy shrieked and started to scramble away. The small, black and white thing emerged from the gore of the dead crawler’s face, like a tuxedo-colored earthworm testing the air after a rain.

I stomped down, killing it.

An achievement flashed, but I waved it away.

Warlord Carl: We have brain worms amongst the troops. Everyone, cross-reference the guy to your left and right with the casualty list.

Rend finally caught up and moved to stand next to me. He took in the scene, seemed to shrug, and moved to eat the dead crawler.

“No, Rend,” I said, still out of breath. “We don’t eat our own.”

An ominous message appeared on my local feed.

Fall back. Defend the castle. Defend the castle. Defend to the death.

I clicked over to the local band.

Warlord Carl: Unleash Tina!

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER PRIESTLY, 14TH EDITION>

In the heat of it... in the absolute, scorching heat of battle, one learns who they really are. What they really want. One faces their greatest fears, yes, but worse, much worse, one oftentimes also faces their greatest desires laid bare. For me, they are the same, and it is my devastation.

Stab, stab, stab.

Splash Zone, Doctor Bones, and several of the strippers huddled around the entrance to the castle as pulse rifle blasts thumped against our pop-up magical defenses. I couldn't remember what these shield spells were called, but it was similar to *Protective Shell*. Instead of a bubble, it came in the form of large, fan-shaped screens. The shields had no time limit, but once cast, they could be hurt with damage, though they were effective against tech-based weapons. We only had one entrance to the castle, not including the now-blown-to-bits air hangar. This was where we were making our stand.

We'd been caught with our pants down. Tipid's 104th Naughty Little Piggies were in charge of base defense, but they were currently spread to the wind, on assignment in the flat lands around the base in all directions,

finishing up the scout towers and manning early-warning defenses several kilometers from here. The plan was to have several thousand defenders around the castle at any given time, but we hadn't been ready. Now we were paying for it. Especially since our most crucial platoon of home defenders, the Beefy Boys SOF, were half dead. This was the squad which consisted of mages whose sole purpose was to make certain all the wall buffs and base shields were always topped off.

We had defenders racing toward us from all directions, but that did us no good right now. There were only a few hundred of us. I braced myself as a thrown grenade got caught in the *One Way* shield. The grenade hung in mid-air and detonated just twenty feet in front of our shield. It stopped the grenades, but it did nothing for the pulse blasts.

Literally dozens of buffs flowed over and into us. Every one of us now glistened with multi-hued shields, and the names over everybody's heads were ridiculously long and ever changing.

But again, the damn pulse guns. They still did their damage. They still burned. Other than the shields right in front of us, all these buffs and protections did was dull the hit. Sort of. Most of these buffs were stat-enhancing. A non-magical blast powerful enough to punch a hole in a tank wasn't going to be stopped by a 10% buff to dexterity.

"Oh, I simply cannot wait for the real magic to turn back on," Doctor Bones rumbled. The former DJ of the Penis Parade was back in his skeletal form. "You heathens are dead. All of you!"

"We're not going to survive long enough for that to happen if you don't pick up that crossbow," Splash Zone said as he popped up and fired a shot. The bolt cracked harmlessly against the building across the way: the newly built, mural-covered barracks.

We had three types of enemies in the camp. We had the Madness Monkeywrenchers, who were invisible. We had the Reaver paratroopers who were massing at the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the main barracks building. And mixed in with it all were a handful of our own mages who'd been assassinated and taken over by the gondii brain worms. If any worms were left in the castle, we didn't know where they were. Rosetta was inside, hunting down any possible compromised soldiers.

And all of this was just the initial attack. They were softening us up for the main force, which was hauling ass toward us from the north.

They'd simply bypassed Florin and the 101st's fallback position. The enemy had left enough troops to occupy our main forces, but the bulk of them would be on us in about half of an hour.

Carl: Louis, what's your status?

Louis: We've finished the repair from the inside, but we gotta get outside to manually fix the portal, otherwise we're gonna stay grounded.

Damnit. That wasn't going to happen any time soon. The "door" to the hangar was literally atop the castle, and anyone who went up there would be a prime target. *I should've made Louis fly back to the other base.*

"I didn't know we'd be dealing with Valtay cheese sticks," Tipid gasped from next to me. The crest had been hit in the shoulder, and the blast had almost taken his arm off. "Those fuckers are dangerous."

"Splash, fill that channel with water!" I called as Bucket Boy cast *Heal* on Tipid. I held a banger sphere tightly in my right hand as more blasts peppered the shield around my head.

"There," Donut called from next to me, peering through the translucent screen. "There by the entrance to the new barracks building! He's standing right in front of the mural of the piggie face!"

I popped up, aimed, and I hurled the metal ball with the full force of my strength. There was a crack, followed by a blood splatter. His invisibility stuttered, and now his outline was clear. A moment later, and he was peppered with crossbow bolts. The form crumpled to the ground, and his Madness mask fell away, revealing him to actually be a soother mercenary, not a true Viceroy.

I dove back under cover as more shots hit the shield, which was holding strong.

Next to me, Mongo squawked in outrage. He wanted to get out there. Rend sat to my left, bouncing up and down in anticipation. He'd been hit twice already by pulse blasts, and all they did was make the level-10 meatball creature fall backward and squeal.

We had anti-magic charms all over base, but apparently the monkeywrencher's invisibility was some sort of tech-based cloak, something even the veterans weren't anticipating. The cloaks were high-quality. Something that existed in the real world, but were considered prohibitively expensive for all but the richest of soldiers. The anti-magic bubbles didn't detect them. Luckily, Donut could still see them with her

glasses. Sort of. She had to use the heat setting, and it took a moment for her to detect them. We had a few other defenders with similar abilities as well, and we were picking them off one-by-one.

It's not going to matter, I thought miserably. They're just keeping us occupied. They just need to keep us pinned for a little longer.

Colonel Rosetta: I need backup! I need edifice explosion suppression inside the castle! Fast! They got to Lonnie! Who do we got? I don't care if it's not your specialty. To the saferoom exit!

From my left, a bune mage named Huey jumped into the castle, buzzing off on his small wings. Another mage, a human crawler named **Nick Sheets** darted from behind his shield before he was hit with a pulse blast, which sent him spinning. I tossed a drop shield at him, but a second blast finished him off before the shield activated. His body sizzled like bacon in a hot pan before catching on fire.

Goddamn it.

Carl: Rosetta, what's happening?

Rosetta: You need to find where Lonnie is and kill the worm fucker in his head. He's not in the castle, but he's systematically turning off the interior protections, one by one from afar. At any moment, that Reaver door is going to open, and their automatons will flood out and into the castle. Setting up defenses and flamers to stop them now.

Lonnie had been one of the more talented mage veterans. The head of the Beefy Boys, which he'd named as a joke after someone said he had to "Beef up the wall defenses." The one in charge of shoring up the interior castle walls with spells. He'd been alive just a few minutes ago. They'd targeted him, got into his head, and used him to start turning off the stacked protection spells. If they were deliberately softening up the interior, that meant Rosetta was correct. The next thing that came out of that door in the situational hallway would be a bomb.

I thought of how we created utter chaos in Zockau using an inconvenient doorway. Someone from the Reaver team must have gotten through that bait shop door back when this space was still used by the mantis team.

Another mage, bleeding heavily from his forehead, jumped behind our shield, cast something to send it back up to 100%, and disappeared inside the castle.

I pulled up my map, looking for Lonnie. The former crawler was a half-elf, meaning he'd been from a relatively early season. There. His dot was moving away from a line of X's in a bunker on the side of the hill. He was now in the mix of purple dots on the far side of the barracks, representing the Reaver paratroopers, who had set up a defensive position inside our own base. These guys weren't eager to get themselves killed. Instead, they were content to sit there and hold open the door for the main enemy force.

My heart sank as a new realization hit me. Lonnie knew about Justice Light, and our last line of defense.

We had to get to him, and fast.

"How do the brain worms work?" I asked Tipid as I rapidly composed new orders. And where the hell was Tina? I sent a new message off to her handlers. "With the memories, I mean. Do they know everything right away?"

"The gondii worms can move into any dead form and take it over, and that includes learning their memories. But it takes some time to know everything. It takes some time before they know what to look for, and they'll have big memory gaps for a while."

I grunted. "We need to focus on the compromised mages. And we need to do it fast, before they figure out how to crack the throne room."

"I could have told you that," Donut said as she pointed out another monkeywrencher to the crossbowmen. "You can smuggle them anywhere, and they can crawl in your ear, kill you, and take you over in just a few seconds. It's absolutely disgusting, but they're quite good allies when they're on your side. You can fit like five of them in your mouth at once."

Tipid nodded. Despite being healed, he still seemed to be in pain. Bucket Boy's healing ability wasn't all that great. "The Valtay charter requires they only take over the brains of people who were willing, but not all gondii live on the correct side of the law. I've heard rumors of such outlaw mercenaries. There's a popular tunnel drama about a crew of them. Called *The Maggot Squad*. They're some of the most expensive mercs in the galaxy. At least on the show. The Valtay government hates the show, but it's really popular." A blast hit the shield, and we all fell back. A moment later, Splash Zone and Doctor Bones high-fived as they took out another invisible merc.

"Are they good guys or bad guys on the show?" Donut asked. "There... in front of the X over the mantis face! Good shot, Alex!"

“Good guys on the show,” Tipid said. His eyes flashed as he spoke. He, too, was rapidly composing orders. “But there’s this other squad that are also gondii, and they are bad. I never got to see the season finale because I came here.”

“Spoiler alert,” Donut said. “The good guys win. That’s what happens on shows like that.” She suddenly hissed and cast *Hole* in a seemingly empty spot right in front of us. She cast and snapped the spell off. Half of a Monkeywrencher appeared on the ground. A grenade rolled away as he toppled over. We all ducked as it went off. The blast painted the ground with mercenary guts.

“Awesome, Donut!” I said, patting her on the head. She was absolutely rigid as she scanned for more enemies.

“I’m just glad I finally found a spell I can use,” she said. “On top of the building. Goodness! That one sure is fat for a mercenary.” A moment later, the form tumbled away backward onto the roof.

“That was a Dreadnaught wearing a Viceroy mask,” Splash Zone said as he rapidly reloaded his small-sized crossbow. “I haven’t seen a real Viceroy amongst any of the Monkeywrenchers. You’ll know them when you see them. They look like my mother-in-law before she gets her daily injections.”

“Wait, Splashy, you didn’t tell me you were married!” Donut exclaimed. “What’s your wife’s name?”

“Snail Trail,” he said. He popped up and fired, but he hit nothing. He hissed in frustration. “She works the early shift at Bitches in the Desperado Club. Her mom works with her, but the later shift. Her name is Grandma Sticky. I haven’t had the chance to talk to them since the club reopened.”

“Grandma Sticky?” Donut asked. “Your mother-in-law’s name is Grandma Sticky? And your wife is named Snail Trail?”

“You should see her pole routine. You wouldn’t think a goblin could move like that, but it’s pretty amazing.”

“Wait, are you talking about Snail Trail’s routine or Grandma Sticky’s? And are you telling me you’re married to a...”

“Holy shit, can we focus on the battle please,” I said.

“I am focused, Carl. I’ve never felt more focused on anything in my life.”

Warning: Walls numbered 17, 19, and 33 have lost all their protections.

Dozens of such messages kept appearing and then blinked away. It was like both sides had access to a bank of wall switches for the same lightbulbs, and we were going back and forth, flipping them all on and off. The moment enough of those bulbs turned off at the same time, I knew that door in the saferoom hallway was going to open, and it would be all over. That's how I would do it.

Frustration overwhelmed me. For each moment that passed, the more the enemy would know about our interior defenses. I growled, looking at the map. "We need to move. We need to get to the compromised mages before they do more damage." All of the mages were now in the middle of the group of paratroopers at the bottom of the hill. I sent another, angrier message about Tina.

"But if your wife doesn't have legs, how does she do *that*?" Donut was asking, having ignored my admonishment. "There, peeking around the left corner!"

Tipid also continued to talk, and it took me a moment to realize he was still talking about the Valtay worms. It was just like Donut and Splash Zone. He was burning off nervous energy, or something. He talked with an almost manic ferocity. "And you really gotta watch out if they don't care about the body they're in. Once they're in, they can take over a body in seconds, reboot it, and animate it long enough to repair whatever damage caused the death in the first place. But if they're not planning on staying long, they can and do hop from host to host. They can 'overclock' the bodies, too. Make them do stuff they couldn't normally. They're much more dangerous than the scree, despite what people think."

"Christ," I said. "Man, are you feeling okay?"

"It's a side effect of the *Extreme Focus* buff," a new voice said, settling next to me. Imani, but she, too, was talking faster than she normally did. Rend grunted and started pushing against her leg while giggling. "Its effectiveness just doubled when I landed in the castle. Everyone in this zone is given a buff to their dexterity, and it helps with multitasking. But when it's a little too powerful, it makes chatty people, like Donut, *extra* chatty. It's like we've all been given a dose of speed. It doesn't seem to be affecting you. Probably because of your Mind Focus, but I'm not sure. You should copy your health screen and send it to me."

"Imani! Where did you come from?"

A whole mess of crawlers were now coming from the castle, moving to the shields, casting new ones. Dozens of them. *Good*, I thought. *We can move out.*

“A group of us made a detour into Shanty Town and used the doggie door. Elle is in the hallway, waiting for the bad guys to come out. Florin and Katia are still with the bulk of the 101st. We gotta push these guys back, and then Louis and his gremlins can come out and repair the bomb bay.”

“All right,” I said. “Donut, how many are left? We gotta...” I paused as I finally received a response to one of my orders.

Kiwi: I’m sorry, Carl. It’s too dangerous. She will stay here, and that’s final. She’s just a child. You just ordered the gnome and the changeling children to stay out of the battle, so why is Tina different?

It was still bizarre to me that scarred, one-eyed, psychotic Kiwi the velociraptor was now a pregnant Ursine. Her personality had completely changed when she’d returned to her bear form. She’d gone from a dangerous, murderous pack leader to a soft-spoken, skittish woman who spent her day cooking food for all the troops.

The woman wasn’t wrong. It *was* hypocritical of me to use Tina. I’d been deliberately ignoring the issue. I’d ordered Louis to kick Bonnie and Skarn off *Party Planner* once we’d landed. Even though they were NPCs, they were children. They looked like children. They acted like children. All the kids in our camp had already seen and experienced more than any child should, and it was fucked-up to deliberately use them in battle. It seemed like a step too far.

But Tina was different. Wasn’t she? We needed her. Did that matter? Or did that make it worse? I’d killed hundreds of children by this point. I hadn’t done it on purpose. Children die in war. So why was I hesitating now? My hesitation didn’t even make sense to myself.

“Actually,” Imani said. She was still examining me. “It says the buff is active.” She shrugged. She turned to Tipid. “Oh my goodness, Bucket Boy. You have to check their pain levels after you heal them! I told you this already. If they’re outworlders, they heal differently.”

I ignored this as I thought of my brother. Of Asher. I thought of his mother, hugging him after she’d poisoned our father. I thought of Donut sobbing at the end of the Butcher’s Masquerade.

She’s a child, too.

We’re going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

I composed a message. *Kiwi, she will be fine. We've buffed her up. We'll all die if she doesn't come out.* I hesitated before sending it. And with pulse blasts peppering the shield all around me, with time running out, I sat there and contemplated what it meant to make such an order.

But at that moment, I realized something. Survival had more than one meaning.

No, I thought. It's Kiwi's decision. *Goddamnit.* I erased the message and started to compose a new order. We'd have to push without her. But before I could finish, Donut interrupted me.

Warlord Donut: GET TINA OUT HERE RIGHT NOW. MY GOODNESS, WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG? DON'T MAKE ME SEND MONGO IN THERE TO DRAG HER OUT. DO IT NOW!

And before Kiwi could even answer, someone to my left shouted "duck!" as the giant doors behind us flew open all the way. Tina finally did come out, screeching and roaring with glee and waving her dead-again magic wand.

The effect was immediate. The bolts against our shields had already started to wane as the Monkeywrenchers died or fled back to the other side of the barracks. But now all the blasts focused on the giant dinosaur who, apparently, could also find the invisible enemies. She screamed with joy and chomped on something next to the barracks. Sparks flew as the enemy, who'd been setting up what looked like a heavy gun, literally exploded in her mouth. Tina shook her head as multiple shield health bars appeared, but then refilled.

"I mean, really," Donut muttered from my left as another enemy went flying into the air, guts trailing where he'd been ripped in half. "We really need to do something about these people not following our orders right away. We need more team-building exercises. Wait, I have an idea."

Her headset appeared. She jumped upon Mongo's back, and together, they leapt up in the air, jumping astonishingly high, landing atop the front of the castle behind us, just above the door. She shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, even the enemies at the bottom of the hill.

"Comrades! There are over 100 bad guys on the other side of that building. They think they can just drop out of the sky and land in our base? Some of them are wormheads who killed our friends. Are we going to let that stand? I don't think so. We gotta kill them, and we gotta do it fast! Alpha squad card reserves, to the roof! Everyone else with cards, save them

for the main force. Let's show these cheese sticks what the Princess Posse does to trespassers. Tina! Sic 'em!"

All around me, cheers rose as everyone jumped to their feet and started to shout.

I exchanged a look with Imani, who was staring at Donut open-mouthed.

"Comrades?" Imani asked as I reached up and grabbed Rend. He giggled incoherently.

"She's been hanging out with Rosetta too much."

"This warlord thing suits her," Imani said. She sounded a little sad. I felt it, too.

Tina finally noticed the mass of enemies at the bottom of the hill, who had started to panic fire their weapons at her. One of the shields on her fizzled out. Then another. The giant allosaurus waved her wand indignantly, let out a howl, and she surged down the hill, her pink tutu flapping in the wind.

"For the Posse!" Donut roared, and as one, we charged.

WE'D DELIBERATELY PLACED THE BARRACKS BUILDING ON THE LIP OF THE hill so the enemy wouldn't have a straight shot at the front door of the castle, but it also blocked our own line-of-sight to the bottom of the hill. Florin had seen this and demanded everyone with a crawler inventory system to have either a *Jump* scroll or a ladder ready to go in their inventory.

Donut, still astride Mongo, leapt from the castle to the top of the barracks, clearing the distance easily. On the ground, shouting defenders flowed around the colorful barracks building on both sides, but a group of us moved to the roof of the building so we'd have a clear view of the enemy's position below us. I scaled the building, using my *Climb* skill, to reach the roof in seconds.

The dead dreadnaught remained up here, his invisibility cloak sparking, causing him to stutter in and out of existence. I scooped up his body and pulled it into my inventory. I took the strange, faceless mask as well.

I rushed across the roof just in time to see Tina angrily stomp into the mass of enemy soldiers. She'd gained momentum as she rushed down the hill, and the crowd of metal-covered mercenaries scrambled from their positions to avoid her charge. They poured fire into her from all sides as she reached down and chomped a soldier, sparks flying.

I skidded to a stop at the edge of the building, dropping Rend, who bounced and ran to my side. Mages on either side of me were casting new

shields on Tina. It was a losing fight. They were going to overwhelm her pretty soon unless we got in there. I tossed a hob-lobber toward a heavy gun position on the far side of their rapidly-deployed defense, but it got stuck in an anti-grenade, *One Way* shield, similar to the ones we utilized. It detonated in the air over everyone's heads. I changed to tossing smoke mantles as I examined the group below us.

Almost all of them were Reavers. Or, at least, mercs who were normally employed by the Reavers. These guys were different than anyone we'd seen before. They had no NPCs amongst them.

They were all heavily armored androids of some sort, and they were terrifying to look at. They seemed out of place here.

My first thought was "space marines." Though not all of them had human-like heads. I thought of the late, armor-covered Paz when I saw them, but instead of shining, plate armor, this was dinged and dirty, olive-colored armor mixed in with cybernetic enhancements. That, plus these guys were all carrying massive rifles.

I knew the real Reavers were *all* robot, with just a little bit of biological brain left over hidden somewhere inside their robot shells. And they could shapeshift, sort of. Something about nanobot-sized, individual machines all coming together to make one.

These mercenaries were somewhere between. More robotic than those weird Nebulars, and certainly a lot scarier.

In the moment before Tina chomped him in half, I examined one particularly large soldier with a human-like head.

Gunnery Sergeant X2. Reaver Security Force Cyborg Drop Trooper. Level 53.

First off, I'd like to apologize for these guys being here. Frankly, I'm just as disgusted as you are that we've allowed this Spelljammer/Warhammer bullshit to infect our good, old-fashioned dungeon crawl. Some of it's pretty damn cool, yeah, but what about consistency? You don't expect Yorbish Gut Parasites to suddenly appear in the middle of a Shakespearean play and lay their eggs in Lady Macbeth's eyes, and there's no reason for you crawlers to have to deal with this stuff here. But what are we gonna do? Compromises had to be made. Don't worry. This is the last floor we'll let it get this far. I've already informed the Valtay I've rejected their updated plans for the 11th floor.

Also, just FYI. These guys are all wearing the “light” version of their armor. If I’d allowed them all to come in here with their heavy duty, Cronus-class power armor, they’d already be putting those collectible, heart-covered boxers on clearance in all waystation gift shops across the galaxy.

Anyway, to understand why a perfectly normal person would want to slowly turn himself into a robot whose sole purpose is to invade planetary colonies, shoot innocent civilians, and spend all day believing he’s a fascist-fighting patriot of industrial capitalism, you have to first understand where these guys come from. Blah, blah, blah, tough childhood in the pollution-choked shadow of the behemoth, Reaver moons where most of the physical goods in the galaxy are manufactured. Blah, blah, drugs, street gangs, 80% taxes, boo-hoo, my mommy is a hooker, no way out, etc. You know the story.

If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. That’s a common theme amongst these misguided souls. Not all of them were bloodthirsty nutjobs when they stepped into the recruiter’s office. Most were just hungry and without hope or direction.

That’s not to say you should feel sorry for them. Not these guys, as these are all members of Warlord Fang’s personal defense deployment.

Rule of thumb. If they have more than two or three cybernetics installed, you know they’ve voluntarily re-upped at least once. You only get one free upgrade a deployment. Or more, if something on your body gets shot off.

Gunny here was once known as Mr. Jake Tortokai. His designation changes each time he’s deployed. At this moment, seconds before his 400-cycle journey to gain Reaver citizenship comes to a permanent and abrupt end at the jaws of a pissed-off, confused child soldier, he is known as X2. He has 23 enhancements to his body.

And since this is the first time you’ve bothered to examine someone from the Reaver system, we might as well add a bit of context to all of this.

If you’re not a vat-born progeny of the Initial, gaining Reaver citizenship, which comes with profit-sharing and a whole lot of additional financial benefits, is an epic pain in the ass. First of all, you have to lose your biological form to get your foot in the door. That first “upgrade” is free. Anything else, there’s only two ways to do it.

One, you can pay for all the upgrades yourself. That's usually a non-starter because the only companies smart enough to hire a moron who allowed the Reavers to cut off a perfectly good hand and replace it with a grasping claw that needs thousands of credits a cycle in upkeep are the space equivalent of a Wendy's or the interstellar carwash. Nothing wrong with such jobs, of course, but they ain't paying enough to fund additional cybernetic upgrades, that's for sure.

So, the second way to do it is to work for the Reavers. For free. They'll feed you, house you, and you get all the healthcare you want. That plus one more upgrade in exchange for a three-cycle deployment worth of work.

The work ain't easy. These guys get thrown feet-first into the fire. They're dropped onto land leases to evict the current settlers so the Reavers can expand their factories. People, like they always do, fight back of course. Such is the way of the universe.

All of that is to say these guys have been fighting a lot longer than you have. This isn't their home turf, and they're not used to Option-three enhancement-zone fighting techniques.

But they should not be underestimated.

I shook my head, and I stopped myself from uttering a complaint about the extra-long description. The last thing I needed was the AI throwing another temper tantrum right now.

X2 the mercenary disappeared in a mist of sparks and blood.

The robots—cyborgs—had formed a semi-circle defense, including shields with several heavy guns. While most were focusing their fire on the rampaging dinosaur, others were finally noticing that Tina's charge was followed by a wave of defenders. And a second wave was descending from the other side of the building as well. They started lobbing smoke bombs of their own, and in moments, the battlefield was once again a mess of smoky chaos. I itched to jump down there—and I would in a minute—but we'd agreed ahead of time that in situations like this I needed to remain where I could keep an eye on the battle as a whole. More of the fan-shaped shields started popping up in front of me as I tried to see what the hell was going on. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Victory had appeared, standing on the far corner of the building, quietly observing. A moment later, and she was joined by a second adjutant I didn't recognize. This was a strange, antlered alien type I'd never seen before.

Warlord Carl: Find the compromised mages, and kill them. Get the worms! Don't let them get away!

"Alpha cards, deploy!" Donut shouted from my right. She looked at me. "Should I send him out?"

"Save him for the main force. How many card carriers do we have in camp right now?"

"A lot now that Imani brought all those crawlers back. I do wish I could use *Fireball* right about now. Or *Minion Army*."

"Save the other auxiliary card carriers. And make sure we have someone looting our fallen crawlers!"

She nodded. All I could see was Tina's head popping up from the smoke, and her shield going up and down, just like the wall protections of the castle behind us. For a moment, three Tinas appeared, someone having cast an illusion, but it was immediately dispelled.

Several of the soldiers around us swept their 8th-floor cards out into the air, and all manner of monsters appeared, including a minotaur; a griffin thing; a terrifying, owl-faced, robed figure with claws. There was a glowing god-like thing riding a giant peacock. There was what I thought was another form of Jesus, but he was just named **1970's Death Cult leader**. That one started loudly complaining his spells weren't working the moment he was summoned, and the crawler who summoned him started yelling back, as if they'd been in mid-argument the last time he'd been summoned. His voice was similar to Uzi Jesus's voice as well. All the rest jumped from the building and into the battle below.

"Carl, watch out! Invisible, behind you!"

I turned, punching as I swirled. I felt my bare fist smack right into the armored chest of something. The creature remained invisible, but let out an "Oof." A glowing dagger spun away as the heavy form fell back.

He was sneaking up on me. Ready to stab me in the back.

I punched again, and an outline appeared, stuttering, revealing this to be another Dreadnaught, clutching at his chest, as if he was surprised at how strong my punch was. It said his name was **J IronFjord**. I punched again, and with my left hand, I ripped at the mask, and it went flying, spinning away like a frisbee. Before I realized it, he was falling backward, me on top of him, me punching again and again into his face. We hit the roof heavily, me on top of him, and I continued to punch. I punched over and over until he didn't have a face anymore.

“Holy gods,” someone muttered, looking down at the carnage. It was the Death Cult Leader guy. “That’s really nasty.”

The Scavenger’s Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

“Donut, do you see any more? Look carefully,” I called, breathing heavily. Behind me, the battle below continued to rage.

“No!”

I turned my attention back to the fight in front of us. But I could feel the eyes of everyone on me.

“Jamal is here!” a voice shouted, somehow rising out of the chaos, finally pulling the attention away from me. The hammerhead shark appeared as he first rolled, then tumbled, down the hill. He didn’t have any of his spider legs installed. He was still waiting for Katia to get a chance to build them, but he rolled down the hill all the same, shouting and flopping. He disappeared into the chaos, only to appear a moment later, rising out of the smoke like he’d somehow managed to jump without legs, a squirming mercenary in his mouth, before disappearing again.

My trap sense suddenly tingled, and multiple lights appeared, glaring through the smoke from the far, right corner of the chaos. Thanks to my advanced *Find Trap* skill, info boxes started popping up one after another. Someone was arming a ton of automatons, all with equipped satchel explosives with a proximity trigger trip.

I checked my map, making sure this wasn’t one of our guys. It wasn’t. That half of the battlefield was all purple dots along with a few of the reanimated mages.

I scoffed.

You motherfuckers might be experienced. You might be battle-hardened, I thought. But you’re in my playground now.

Warlord Carl: Fire in the hole! Everybody brace!

I cast *Tripper*.

The explosion, when it came, was bigger than I was expecting. One moment, my map was a convoluted mess. And then we were all knocked off our feet. Everyone but me and a few others with *Steady* buffs. Still, it felt as if I’d been kicked in the chest by a horse. I took a blast of heat damage, but not much. Donut howled as Mongo stumbled back. Rend blew across the roof like he’d been punted, disappearing back behind me and over the far edge. The building itself, which was still heavily protected from blasts, shuddered, and for a moment, I feared it would collapse.

I, like always, was temporarily deafened. My ear drums were blown out, and even though I didn't want to admit it to myself, I was getting used to the feeling. There was something comforting about that specific kind of pain.

The smoke that covered the battlefield seemed to get sucked into the explosion, and in the moments after, everything suddenly in view, it seemed the world was paused. A still life of a battle's aftermath.

But then, movement. All of the cyborgs, every last one of them, were on the ground, overwhelmed and struggling. The entire area where the automatons had been gathered was nothing but a crater, and all the cyborgs in that area were just gone. A sizzling, metallic torso landed heavily on the roof behind me. I couldn't hear it, but I could feel it. Most of the veterans were also on their backs, though, miraculously, my feed said none had died in the blast. Tina was on her back, health in the red, all her shields gone. I could see she was crying out, but I couldn't hear. I imagined she was crying for her mother.

But the current crawlers, along with a few of our NPCs, like Doctor Bones and Splash Zone and Bomo and Sledge, were the first to get themselves to their feet.

And in a situation like this, he who recovers fastest, wins.

They moved to finish off the defenders. Our men and women crawled over the remaining cyborgs like an army of ants. In moments, it was done.

Warlord Donut: Get the mages! Watch for the worms coming out of their heads!

The death cult leader guy totem stood next to me. He hadn't entered the battle at all, nor had he been affected by the blast. The crawler who summoned him was sitting on the roof, holding his head.

My ears rang as they healed, the sound slowly coming back like I was coming up out of water.

The totem stood there with his hands on his hips, looking at the carnage. He said something to me.

"What?" I asked.

The long-haired man grinned. "I said I could really use a nice, refreshing drink right about now. Want to join me?"

At the same moment, Donut messaged in the war chat.

Warlord Donut: Stop that mage! He's fleeing! That's the last one!

I looked, frantically. There. Lonnie the mage. He was running. Up the hill, back toward the castle, moving supernaturally fast. I wasn't sure what his plan was, or if he had a plan at all, but the fact the dead mage was still moving meant he still had a worm in his head.

I activated the *Daughter's Kiss* skill, and I jumped off the second story, landing right atop the fleeing mage.

Rosetta: That was all of them. The door disappeared. But that doesn't mean they can't use the doggie door again. We're going to have to separate the safe room from the castle and keep up a permanent guard. Or we need to just kill the entrance all together. That might be more safe.

Carl: I was thinking the same thing, but we need to talk about it because I don't want to lose easy access to Mordecai and the saferoom. Since they can only bring a limited number of NPCs into their own safe room, they can't do a full-scale invasion through that door. But we do need to isolate it for certain. We need to get on that now while we decide what to do. None of that is going to matter if we don't beat these assholes back. But for the next few minutes, focus on helping Louis to open the roof.

We were cleaning up after the attack, resetting our defenses and looting the bad guys before the main force would be on us in ten or fifteen minutes. They probably wouldn't march right into us now that their beachhead was closed off, but we had to be ready. We had more defenders appearing by the moment, including Boomer's 106th Bloody Leeches along with the scattered 104th members of the Naughty Little Piggies who'd come running the moment we were attacked.

In addition, the 105th Scream Warriors were harassing the backside of the enemy approach while helping to break Florin's 101st from the stalemate that had kept him buttoned up in the fallback trenches.

The enemy's attempt to soften us up and give themselves a funnel into our base hadn't been successful, but it had left us bloody and limping.

This next fight was going to be a rough one. They had their armor with them. They had their numbers. It would be the first time I would be facing orcs in battle.

Florin said he was pretty sure Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire was with them, leading the charge.

I looked over at Donut, who was still on the roof of the barracks behind me, talking with Victory. The other adjutant was gone.

In some ways, I wished we didn't have these pauses between fights. These ups and downs felt too jarring. I didn't like having to think about what was going to happen next. I just wanted it to happen.

Samantha appeared, floating into the camp and coming to hover next to me as I helped set up another anti-air gun. She was completely covered with leaves and dirt. She spit, expelling dust and dirt from her mouth. She appeared as if she'd been rolling along and then had flown in the rest of the way.

"Louis accidentally dropped me out of his airplane," she said. Behind us, Tina had recovered and was chomping on one of the dead androids, grunting angrily and spitting out the metal bits. The sound was like that of soda cans being flattened. At her feet, Rend and Mongo were doing the same, digging out the meat from the androids like they were at a crab bake.

Kiwi was there, hands on her hips, yelling up at Tina to come inside. Tina was ignoring her.

Samantha looked around camp. "Did you guys have *another* party without telling me?"

I grunted. "That was just the preview. The big fight is about to begin."

“I AGREE. YOU NEED TO DESTROY THE BAIT SHOP,” MORDECAI SAID. “AND you need to do it now. They can just drop a nuke through that door and be done with it. They needed the mages taken out first for it to be effective, but now that plan has failed, they might try it anyway. The walls will be okay, but everyone inside the castle will be turned into mince. The fact they haven’t done it yet is probably because that orc out there wants to take you on himself. Best to close off the door now while we still can.”

We’d jumped into the guild to grab supplies and discuss the saferoom issue. The enemy’s northern army was here, massing about a half kilometer from the edge of camp, close enough that we could see them all. There were so many of them, they filled the horizon. Orcs. Slimes. More Reavers. Mounted elves on zebras. Large, lanky creatures called basher trolls. Lots of gnolls.

And then there was the orc prince. He’d come in riding some giant creature that looked like a cross between a hippopotamus and a yak. He was decked out in glittering, opalescent armor covered with feathers. He marched in, surrounded by his honor guard, a group of heavily-armored and equally decked-out orcs. These guys weren’t carrying guns, but long polearms with crescent, moon-shaped blades at the end.

The orcs all wore flags on their backs like they were feudal Japanese warriors. The flags were black, vertical rectangles with a shimmering, silver orc skull in the center. It made it easy to distinguish the orc troopers from

the others. The Bone Clan of the Skull Empire seemed to favor larger-sized mercenaries. There were quite a few of the Sai rhino guards in their midst, along with several of the Bactrian and Dromedarian camels, all armed with shoulder-mounted missiles. They also had a platoon of the tall basher trolls. Explosive experts, I knew. We'd have to watch those guys.

And while the orc team looked powerful, there weren't that many of them compared to the others. There were *only* a thousand of them or so, at least as far as we could see, just a fraction of the Bone Clan's strength. It appeared *all* of the Operatics were also out there, along with a healthy mix of everyone else. It was no wonder Florin had been forced to fall back. There were so many enemies, I couldn't count. Tens of thousands. Significantly more than we had here with us, even with the backups all arriving by the moment.

"Well, we're absolutely fucked, aren't we?" Tipid had said from my side as we first gazed upon the group that gathered before us. The virtual sun was finally rising, causing the giant army to glint like a blade.

I grunted. "You know, you coming here was supposed to instill us with hope."

The older, bald man grinned back at me and shrugged. "We just didn't want you to be lonely, mate."

Donut was examining the orc prince via her new *Targeting* skill which had just been added to her crown. She let out a surprised yelp.

"Carl, Carl, that's not Prince Stalwart!"

"What?" I asked, reexamining the large orc from afar. He was bigger than I first thought, wasn't he? "You're not telling me that's the Maestro? I thought because he's driving Grull, he can't play faction wars."

"He can't," a new voice said, stepping forward. Baroness Victory, peering off into the distance. "Well I'll be fucked raw with a Soother sausage. That's him alright. He must've come up from the 18th floor at the last minute. I wonder if he brought all his concubines with him?"

"Wait," I said. "The *king*? That's King Rust, Stalwart and Maestro's dad? Are you shitting me?"

"He looks more like the Maestro than Stalwart," Donut said. "Like a giant baby pictured through a *Jersey Shore* filter. And then turned into an orc. He's all scowling and gross like he's being forced to wear such ridiculous clothing. He's covered in feathers, and he has big, gaudy rings on all his fingers. Where does he get off dressing like that?"

“That’s traditional orc battle parade regalia,” Tipid said.

“It doesn’t say he’s a co-warlord,” Donut said. “Just a war chief. Does that mean Prince Stalwart is still the warlord? That’s what it says in the interface.”

“Hmm,” Victory said. “His appearance was probably a very last-minute decision. It’s news to me. Rust hasn’t participated in Faction Wars in quite a long time.” She sounded taken aback, almost offended that she hadn’t known her brother-in-law was here. “Not since he was a prince himself. I wonder if he’s sober.”

Donut made a derisive noise. “Well, he looks like he stumbled drunk into the closet of a colorblind drag clown. Though I do like that boa. I wonder if it’s magical. I could use a boa, though I wouldn’t want Tina to get jealous. That’s kinda her thing.”

“Do you have his stats yet?” I asked.

“Hold your panties, Carl. The *Size-Up* takes a minute. And that creature he’s riding is absolutely disgusting. Her name is Gonk. What kind of name is that? I bet she smells like the feed bowl at an illegal petting zoo. She’s something called a Swamp Yak. Okay. I got it. He’s level 78. His main weapon is a whip! My goodness, he knows a lot of spells. Like dozens and dozens. Most are level one but some are from level 11 to 15. How did he manage that? None of them look useful right now except all those shield spells. He has that same *Protective Shell* as you, but it’s level 15! And *Trippler*. And *Puddle Jumper*! What a copydog.”

“Don’t anybody tell Rosetta he’s here yet,” Tipid said. “I’ll tell her.” He paused, a strange look of worry on his face. “She has some history with him.”

“If he just got here when we did, how *did* he level so fast?” I asked.

“That’s easy,” Tipid said. “He likely has a ring of Divine Suffering for the stats—and the levels that come with charging the ring—and a necklace of Indelible Woe for the spells.”

“Indelible Woe?” I asked. “Is that like the tattoo thing Rosetta is trying to make us do?”

“Similar. Indelible Woe is in the same collection as the Divine Suffering ring. It trades out a random spell of your own for a spell of a target’s. If you *kill* the target, it’ll be one of their five highest-level spells. Like the Divine Suffering ring, it only works on crawlers. And people like me. It’s not all that useful unless you’re a complete psychopath with a bunch of spells you

can afford to lose. The necklace was popular a long time ago, but they all agreed to stop using it because combatants were farming crawlers to power it up, and it was a little... messy.”

I felt my anger rise, and I pushed it back. “And the Divine Suffering ring is any better?”

He shook his head. “It’s a long story. But trust me, the necklace is worse. Much worse. Anyway. Rosetta’s tattoos will help you share skills and spells without actually killing anyone. It just needs to brew for a little longer.”

I sighed. We didn’t have longer. The army across the way was in the process of digging in and setting up their siege weapons. A secondary force, also from the north, consisting of their slow-moving armor equipment, was pushing their way in. They were currently delayed, engaged with Florin and the 101st Crocodiles. The 105th had also engaged but had to fall back after sustaining heavy losses. Last I heard, Florin had personally led a charge that took out one of their tanks, causing a traffic jam. The enemy had been forced to reroute into a minefield and lost two more vehicles along the way.

This enemy force in front of us now could attack at any moment, but most everyone suspected they would wait until their position was properly built and the armor arrived. We already had some trebuchets of our own dropping rocks on them, but their shields were keeping them mostly at bay.

Now, here in the guildhall common area, it was me, Donut, Louis, Rosetta, Tipid, Justice Light, Imani, Elle, and a handful of mercenaries. Tran was still on the southern front, and Colonel Boomer was outside, organizing the defense. Katia and Bautista were with Florin. Li Jun and Li Na remained in Shanty Town.

Victory was also in the room, silently observing.

Bomo and Sledge along with a few strippers were in the process of moving boxes of supplies from the various crafting rooms and out the door and into the castle while we still had the ability.

Donut sat on the counter with the guildhall Bopca, animatedly going back and forth about purchasable base upgrades. Rosetta was with her, but she had a look on her face that suggested she was about to throttle the cat. Tipid had told her about King Rust’s presence, but she hadn’t shown any outward reaction at all. She’d called Donut over and insisted we spend the last of our pooled money to defend the base.

I started moving in that direction to stop any fights before they started. I didn't know what the argument was about, but I knew Rosetta had a short fuse, and she was probably internally dealing with a bunch of shit. Donut had that determined, smug look on her face that meant she was going to get her way, and if she didn't, she wouldn't shut up about it.

"What about the hangar?" Louis asked. "We just fixed it. If we close off the saferoom, won't we lose access to it here at the castle?"

"Yeah, what about the hangar?" Samantha added. She was on the floor by Louis, wetly and loudly gnawing on his ankle, and he'd given up kicking her away.

"We can buy a standalone hangar access point and attach it to the castle," Rosetta said, looking up from the terminal.

"Only five million gold," Donut added. She did not sound thrilled about it. "And I can't believe they're making us pay for another anti-air gun after the last one blew up. We should be allowed to charge the other guys for damaging our base. Five million for that one, too!"

"This is a new gun, not a replacement," Rosetta said.

Donut let out a harumph.

I found myself watching Donut and her reactions. She was undergoing several changes, and I was worried about her. She seemed to be simultaneously maturing and regressing at the same time, and I wasn't sure I understood why. It was like she was rising to the occasion when it mattered, and she was letting it all out once the immediate danger passed. Outside, she was Warlord Donut. Serious. Well, serious for her. Determined. Flexible. But one on one, her stubbornness was growing. Her snappiness was ratcheted even higher than usual. If we survived these next few hours, I'd have to sit down with her and talk about it.

We were having her buy a third, mobile anti-air gun since several of the spider guns were wrecked, and we had an armor slot available. This particular one could be turned 90 degrees and used to mow down the bad guys on the ground as well. She turned back to the bopca. "Now, about those banners. Do you think you can make that work? It has them on the menu, but how long before they're printed? We need them now. And I need them to be wavy."

"I can't control the wind, Princess," the bopca said.

"Donut," Rosetta said. "Please. I can only be in the saferoom for a few more minutes before I am kicked out. We do not have time..."

“Carl says we need to make him angry and have him attack before his backup arrives, and this will most definitely accomplish that. Now, I don’t wish to pull rank, but I am the general, and you are the colonel. While I wasn’t in the Navy like Carl, I do know that means I am your boss and if I say it’s final, it’s final.”

“Donut,” I said. “Don’t be mean to the people who came to help us.”

“Don’t worry, Donut,” Elle said. “If you want your banner to wave in the wind, I can make that happen.”

“Thank you, Elle,” Donut said.

Behind us, a group of sluggalos complained loudly as they were ushered outside by some of the were castors. The majority of these guys were out in the field with the 101st and the 105th, but we had a small reserve group in the guildhall barracks, which they’d turned into some sort of slug clubhouse. Imani went in there earlier and immediately noped out. She said she didn’t want to talk about it.

Justice Light also had some of the bigger slugs on his team. In fact, he’d inquired about having himself infected with slugpox so he could make more, but Rosetta told us not to allow it. That we had to be careful with his requests because the skyfowl had a tendency to hyperfixate on his projects, and he’d end up killing himself in the process. So instead, we allowed him to pick a few of the higher-level slugs to accompany him. I didn’t know how any of those raving idiots would be of help, and I was kind of afraid to ask, but apparently the slugs were right at home in the tunnels beneath the castle. And they all seemed to love Justice Light almost as much as they loved Imani.

I hadn’t spent too much time speaking to Justice Light about things other than traps, but I knew both Tipid and Rosetta were especially protective of the author of the 8th edition of the cookbook. He’d had a tough time in the dungeon, and I’d read quite a bit about his thoughts after he’d killed an NPC. It had a major impact on him. But on top of all that, something especially horrific had happened to him during his indentureship as a shopkeeper, and it had changed him even further. It was during this incident when he’d lost his wing. I didn’t know the story, but I did know it had turned the somewhat morose but proud skyfowl into a quiet, strange, obsessive-compulsive creature. He had a few strange ticks, always moving

his head, back and forth, like he was hearing things that weren't really there. He muttered to himself a lot.

I turned my attention back to the problem at hand. I knew Mordecai and the others were right, but I hated the idea of losing a saferoom entrance. "There's gotta be something we can do. Losing access will make the closest saferoom one of the ones in Shanty Town. There are a few out in the forested region, including the one at the Area 52 base, but that's it. It'll make it so it's a half hour ride to get to base if we're using a tracked vehicle. It'll make everything more difficult."

I indicated the squat skyfowl standing quietly in the corner, muttering to himself. He had a folded piece of red paper in one of his talons and was in the middle of jabbing a needle through it and sewing it to another piece of paper, this one orange. I had no idea how he managed to do it all and remain upright. Tipid said the eagle made the nonsensical art pieces as a way to calm himself. There had to be a dozen of the folded pieces of paper scattered on the floor around him. "Justice Light will lose access to my sapper's table and the bomber's studio. Rosetta will lose easy access to the alchemy table and Mordecai."

"It's okay," the eagle said, tilting his head at me. His eyes rolled to meet mine, and I could feel his strange intensity. He stretched out his lone wing, like he was cracking a knuckle. "I already have everything I need."

"Are you sure? You're at my table a lot."

He returned his attention to his sewing. "It's safer and faster to use your table, but there's nothing left I can't do on my own."

"We can collapse the front of the shack," Tipid said. "That'll turn it off, but we could still repair it and bring it back online in an emergency."

"You'd have to guard it," Mordecai said. "If it's repairable, an enemy can splash a *Fix* potion on it, and we're back to the beginning. There's also *Emergency Repair* scrolls, too."

"Wait, *Fix*?" Donut asked. "Are you telling me there's a potion that fixes stuff? Then why did I have to buy more gun thingies!"

"Because the ingredients for the potion are rare and more expensive than most anything you're trying to fix. I'm making one of the potions now, but it's only to be used in an emergency. The scrolls are rare, too."

"Let's do that," I said. "That way we can keep the structure inside the castle, but we'll keep a heavy guard on it at all times. If we've gotten to the point where they're able to fix it from this side, we're already screwed. That

reminds me, we took out all the gondii worms, but we don't know if any of them learned any of our secrets or not."

"It doesn't matter," Justice Light said. He pulled a thread with his talon, and all the folded pieces of paper scattered around him came together to form a strange, spiral-like pattern. "I have contingencies heaped upon contingencies. Have faith in the process. Danger lives in what they can't see."

"Okay," I said. "Hopefully we'll never have to find out."

Donut: ARE WE SURE WE TRUST THIS GUY? HE'S OBVIOUSLY UNSTABLE.

Carl: I trust him with my life.

Donut: OKAY. BUT YOU'RE TRUSTING HIM WITH MORE THAN THAT. IT'S WITH ALL OF OUR LIVES.

Carl: Hopefully it won't get to that point.

Donut: AFTER ALL THIS BUILD-UP?

"I'm out of time," Rosetta said, and she got up to leave the guild. She would need to get out there and kill someone if she wanted her blood bar refilled. I knew several crawlers were having this issue. Justice Light, who'd already risen to level 65, did not have to ever worry about it. He was getting partial experience and credit for almost all the traps out there.

Tipid had refilled his bar during that last fight. But I knew the few former crawlers we let into the guild that worked as support staff for the base were struggling. Luckily, the blood bar didn't affect the dungeon-born mercs.

"Hey," I called after Rosetta. "Get ready to close off the safe space. But send out a five-minute warning to everybody so they can grab stuff if they need it. And wait until we're out, too. Donut, buy the hangar upgrade."

Donut started to grumble. "We're almost out of money, Carl." She then gasped with delight as the bopca emerged from the back of his little area dragging several rolled up banners.

Colonel Boomer: Whatever you guys are jawing about, you best finish it up and get out here. King Rust is approaching by himself. I think he wants to talk.

Victory spoke at the same time. The orc's eyes were flashing. "Rust is approaching. He's asking for an official, registered parlay."

"Is that supposed to mean something?" I asked.

“You’ll both be protected from subterfuge and sneak attacks while you talk. You’ll be in protected bubbles as you go back and forth. No chat will be available during the meeting. You can’t attack him, and he can’t attack you. Don’t worry how it works. We’re the ones who cast the spell.”

“Great,” I muttered.

Warlord Donut: IS HE MOUNTED ON THE YAK THING?

Colonel Boomer: Yes. He looks like quite the butterfly up there. It makes me want to punch him in the face.

Warlord Donut: KIBBEN, WE NEED YOU. FAST. GET THE HOWDAH READY.

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KIBBEN, THE GRIZZLED, FORMER STABLEMASTER OF THE HIGH ELF CASTLE grunted one last time as Donut positioned herself into the howdah—the ridiculously ornate, covered carriage thing mounted to the back of Simoom, the albino rhinoceros. Both the howdah and the rhino were actually owned by Ferdinand. He’d been riding the thing when we first met him on the sixth floor. He wanted the rhinoceros back, but since his castle was still underwater, we were keeping her in our own castle for now. She was stabled in the same room where Tina lived. Apparently, Tina and the rhino hadn’t gotten along at first, and Kibben had to work especially hard to keep them from mauling each other. But now, Tina seemed to treat the rhino like a pet. According to Kibben, the two were inseparable.

To me, Simoom the rhino seemed especially chill. She would have to be to put up with Ferdinand. According to Kibben, she was as gentle of a mount as they came. Like an old horse they used for first-time riders. Unlike most every other thing in the dungeon, she seemed like a genuine animal. No hints of extra intelligence like Mongo had.

And speaking of Mongo. He sat there, grunting and whining with displeasure at the sight of Donut climbing onto a different mount.

“Now, Mongo, you’ll be staying here while mommy goes out there riding this thing. No, quit whining. This is just so we have a mount the same size as the bad guy. It’s only for show. Pretend like mommy is acting in a movie and pretending someone else is her child. Goodness, Rend, why are

you whining now, too? It's only temporary. It doesn't mean anything. Carl, tell your meatball to stop upsetting Mongo."

I chinned at Rend and Mongo. "Kibben, will you keep these two occupied while we're out there?"

"At your service," the old high elf said, patting Rend on the head. "I got a bit of experience with belly achers." He pulled some sort of treat out of his pocket, tossed it in the air, and it bounced off the top of Rend's head. He giggled and went chasing after it.

I watched the round pet scurry off. "What's the difference between a tummy acher and a belly acher?"

"No real difference," he said. "They tend to call 'em bellies when they get extra big, but it's not written down anywhere or anything like that. I remember this fellow from his last incarnation, and even though he was on his first run, he was still pretty big. He's a special one." Rend returned, chewing the treat. Kibben patted him again, and Rend let out a purring noise.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Everybody is waiting."

"You, rhinoceros," Donut said. "Go. Go now."

Simoom snorted and waved her tail. She did not move. Her white, armored shell pieces made an almost ceramic-like sound as they scraped together.

"Carl, it's not working. Why is she just standing there?"

Kibben chuckled. "Just push the horn forward if you want to go forward. Pull back to stop. It's easy. If she gets spooked, she might get to trotting. Just pat her behind to get her to stop."

"I will most certainly not be smacking the behind of this thing like some common racetrack jockey."

"Not a smack. That'll make her run faster. A gentle rub."

"What? I'm supposed to stop the rampaging rhinoceros by giving it a butt massage?"

"Donut," I said, frustration rising. "This was *your* idea."

Donut did as she was instructed, and Simoom started clomping forward. "Goodness. This is just like one of Carl's video games. Does she go faster? It's like I moved from a Maserati to a dump truck." She made a face. "She smells like a dump truck, too."

"Come on, Princess," I said, lowering the curtains on her howdah as we moved out of the castle to face the enemy army.

My head was a swivel as we slowly marched down the hill, still smoldering from our earlier fight. We clomped past all of our positions. We had multiple, fortified bunkers set up. They were made of some sort of composite concrete, different than the castle itself. Almost impenetrable. Most of the guns we looted were user locked, meaning we couldn't use them without wasting one of our precious *Cracker Jack* scrolls. But the bigger guns had no such restrictions. We had them set up in the bunkers.

We also had the earthworks teams under our feet. While we hadn't been prepared for the paratroopers or the attack from within our own base, the enemy right now was camping exactly where we'd anticipated. All around me, the posse was giving off an air of quiet determination, like we were waiting for them to make the first move. But in fact, all around me, everyone was working furiously.

I still wasn't confident it would be enough. There were a lot of them out there. I just needed to delay as long as possible.

Donut was loudly complaining she could barely see through the fabric curtain.

Warlord update: Two Pieces of Armor, both owned by the Operatic Collective have been captured and added to your inventory. Captured inventory does not count against your limit.

Carl: Good job, Florin!

We only had a single road leading out to the empty space between our position and the enemy's. We had Tripper-resistant traps on the fields on either side of us. But King Rust had a level 15 in the *Tripper* spell, and that gave each trap a 90% chance to blow anyway if he cast it.

Florin: Good news, bad news, Mate. We stopped the armor in its tracks. As you just saw, we even managed to capture two of their rolling boom boxes. As long as they got infantry support, they're bloody ripper machines. Look like those British Mark V's from the first world war, but with a top turret and a single anti-air tube, which was surprising to me. They're called Weepers. Warning Louis to steer clear of these things now. Super high tech on the inside. That's the good news. The bad is, them guys you're looking at most certainly know they lost the whole regiment and aren't gonna want to wait to get sandwiched

between you and the 101st. So they're probably gonna make their move soon.

Carl: 10-4. I'm about to have a conversation with King Rust. Don't know where the rest of the orcs are hiding.

Florin: Try to keep him talking as long as you can. We're rolling out now. I have Katia and Bautista with what's left of the 105th flanking your position so we can keep the west opened up. At the very least, they can keep open a corridor of retreat into Shanty Town if you get overrun. You be careful of those cunts, especially the ones with the banners. They are beasts. Keep your head down, and I'll see you soon.

Carl: You too. Oh, and Florin?

Florin: Yeah, mate?

Carl: Are we having fun yet?

Florin: You just keep that castle safe, and I'll give you my answer when we're face-to-face.

King Rust stood by himself, mounted upon his swamp yak. The mount was much bigger than I originally thought. So was King Rust. He had the wide frame of his younger son, the Maestro. His glittering, feather-covered armor made him appear even bigger, like a colorful tidal wave, crashing upon the back of the hairy creature.

Still, the large orc seemed slumped over in the saddle. Tired. Old. Almost like he was injured and about to fall off.

A new form appeared, zapping into existence as we approached. The orcish adjutant. We hadn't met this one yet. A grixist. The same type of creature as Huanxin Jinx, but taller and thinner. The six-eyed alien said something to Rust, and he gave an angry retort.

"Let me do the talking until it all breaks down," I said.

"Are we still trying to entice him to attack early?" Donut's voice sounded nervous as it came from the interior of the howdah. "The whole plan was to annoy him and upstage him so he's embarrassed in front of his troops. I wouldn't have ridden this disgusting thing if I knew we were going to change our plans."

"He's going to attack us no matter what we do," I said. "But we need to buy time first. So I talk first, and then you. We want him as red-hot angry as we can make him. Angry people make mistakes."

Donut muttered something under her breath I couldn't hear.

I took a peek at the warlord chat. We had dozens of messages coming in by the second as everyone continued to prepare the fight. The former Prism castle, which I'd left in the hands of a Madness mercenary, changed hands for the third time, which reset the six-hour clock. This time back to the Dream, as if the Madness and the Dream were fighting over who had the rights to the sliver of land. But as long as they kept going back and forth, the castle remained Posse territory.

I pushed that out of my head as we pushed forward.

Colonel Tipid: Has anyone seen...

The message was cut off as a blue bubble formed around us. Victory appeared, walking alongside us like she'd been there the whole time.

"The parlay shield is up. Both you and Rust have independent shields, and once they touch, you'll be able to talk. The shields will move with you two, so both of you stay close to each other. You will not be able to do physical or magical harm to each other. Saferoom rules apply inside of the bubble. Once you've concluded, the shields will disengage when you're approximately 100 meters from each other."

"Who's that adjutant?" I asked.

"His Honorable Judge Deng Bao," she said. "He's an old, experienced adjutant. He's always the adjutant for the previous year's victor."

I peered at the creature. There was something particularly unsettling about this type of alien. "Is he related to Huanxin Jinx?"

Huanxin was the heiress who was currently on the 12th floor, driving the goddess Eileithyia. The same goddess Katia worshiped. The same goddess who would choose Katia's fate when she finally ate that orchid in her inventory. Currently, she was our only hope at getting both Donut and Katia off this damn floor.

Victory chuckled. "He's a judge. He is impartial. He's very good at his job, so his relations do not matter. But, no. He is not related to Huanxin. She does not have any living relatives as far as I'm aware other than her child clone. When he's not doing this, Judge Deng sits on one of the highest courts in the galaxy."

"So, he's a lawyer, like you?"

"Yes. Not all judges were once lawyers, unfortunately. But I was, and so was he. He is older than me, but we went to the same school. He was a professor by the time I got there. He taught me almost everything I know about galactic taxation law."

“What about Carl’s lawyer?” Donut asked from behind the curtain.
“Quasar. Did he go to the same school as you, too?”

Victory let out a surprisingly pig-like snort. “I think not.”

Donut suddenly pulled the screen veil away.

“Carl, what’s wrong with the orc guy? Is he... is he crying?”

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I MOVED TO SEND A QUICK MESSAGE TO DONUT BEFORE I REALIZED THE NO-chat-in-the-bubble rule also meant between me and her.

“Let me do the talking,” I repeated, whispering to Donut. “Don’t derail whatever he wants to say. Not yet.”

“He looks like he’s already derailed, Carl.”

King Rust, was indeed, crying. But there was something strange with his demeanor. I couldn’t tell if he was crying from rage, sorrow, or laughter. It was like he was experiencing all three emotions at once. He wasn’t just crying. He was angrily muttering to himself, saying things to his adjutant, and then putting his hands against his own face in an odd, woe-is-me gesture. As we watched, he looked up into the air and shook his giant fists. It was like a caricature of someone having some sort of psychotic episode.

I suddenly thought of Commander Stockade, the late leader of the Democratic Sortion. He’d been acting crazy like this before he’d killed himself, too. Was that it? Had this guy been hit with some sort of insanity debuff? That didn’t seem right.

“Is he always like this? What the actual fuck is wrong with him?” I muttered as we approached.

“Uh, I don’t know. That’s for you to find out. I guess,” Victory said. She bowed to the grixist adjutant. “Your honor.”

“Judge,” he replied, also bowing. “Let us take our leave of these two. I would like to converse with you.” He, too, seemed out of sorts. Shaken by

something.

Victory nodded. “Good day, brother,” she said to King Rust, who didn’t respond. The two adjutants disappeared. They reappeared nearby, but outside the strange shield bubbles. Judge Deng produced a tablet and handed it to Victory. She started watching some video, but it was too far away to see what it was.

Simoom snorted and took a step forward and sniffed at Gonk, the larger swamp yak, who snorted in return.

“Well, well, well,” Donut began. She hadn’t put the veil back on the howdah. She’d positioned herself on the built-in pillow like she was just lounging there “If you’re crying because you wish to surrender, I will hear your terms now. But I must warn you, we’ll have very specific demands. Carl here will require at least two of your, what are they called? Concubines? Yes, two of them, plus...”

“Stop,” Rust said, holding up a meaty hand. His voice was surprisingly gentle and tired. So much so, that Donut actually *did* stop. “Please, stop. We must speak.”

It was there, on the first finger, catching my eyes like they were drawn to it. A ring of Divine Suffering.

The large orc gave a very heavy sigh and looked up into the sky.

“I wish we were on the real surface. I can feel it there, this false ceiling. It’s oppressive. Worse than a dome.” He rubbed his eye while we waited for him to speak.

After a long pause, he said, “Do you have any children, human? Or did you?”

I swallowed. What was this?

“No,” I said tentatively.

Rust reached down and gave Gonk the yak a warm pat. “I am jealous of you. I have three, and all three are idiots.”

I grunted. “I don’t know one of them, but I can’t disagree with you regarding the other two.”

“That third, my daughter. She’s the one you need to worry about.” He paused again. Victory was now pacing back and forth, still watching the tablet. Rust, too, was watching Victory.

“She never liked me. Your adjutant. Right now, she’s watching the video my daughter just sent out on the open tunnel. Did they show it to you?”

This had to be some sort of trick, but I didn't know what his angle was. His third daughter was named Princess Formidable. She sponsored Katia, and she'd been the one to gift Katia with the crossbow bolt meant to kill her own brother, the Maestro.

"They haven't shown us anything," I said.

He really was old, I was starting to see. I suddenly thought of my own father, sitting there in that bed, dying of cancer. In the end, my father had still been blind to what he was. But this guy... A chill washed over me. *He knows he's about to die.* But why? How?

Rust shook his head. "There's a saying, amongst the former crawlers. The ones who eventually go free. It's something like, 'Once you enter the dungeon, you will die in the dungeon.' I've always dismissed it as weak, dishonorable rubbish. But, deep down, I knew. I knew it was true. Not just for the people, but for us, as a society."

This guy was so out of pocket, so out of character from what I was expecting, I just stood there, unable to think of a response. I exchanged a look with Donut, who'd stopped pretending to lounge on her saddle and now sat up, paying rapt attention.

Rust continued. "A few days ago, my lovely daughter, along with a detachment of Skull Empire marines, took control of one of my own cruisers. The crew thought they were following orders, and I wasn't even aware they'd left orbit. This warship is now about five hours away from reaching the monitor station that's currently in orbit around the second planet in this system. Formidable just sent out a message to the entire Syndicate. She is planning on taking that station, going in, and manually activating the system failsafe. When that happens, a reaction will take place in this system's star, and we will all die."

I thought about that for a moment, and I had the only reaction I could think of.

I laughed.

"You're serious?"

The old orc straightened on his saddle. "I do not see the humor in this. And do not insult me, Carl. The Skull Empire has never engaged in subterfuge."

I opened my mouth to refute that, but I held myself in check.

Through the wall of the bubble, Victory and Judge Deng were quietly talking. She'd dropped the tablet to the ground, and it remained there, video

still playing. Victory was much bigger than the other adjutant. As I watched, he patted her on the waist, the movement strangely affectionate.

This is real, I thought. This isn't some sort of trick. This is really happening. I fought the urge to laugh again.

"And you marched your army here to tell us this? Why?"

"I marched the horde here to end this farce once and for all. The message from my daughter just came in as we arrived." He paused, shifting in his saddle. "There's glory in dying in battle. And, you might not believe this. But I respect you, Carl. My sons do not see it, but you have bested them multiple times. You have a warrior's heart. In another time, there would be honor to face you in battle and die. Instead of learning from their mistakes, you have succeeded in just making them more angry, and they act like petulant children. I came here to protect my family. And if we are to suffer further humiliations, at least he who casts the shadow will be me, and not my children, who have long lives in front of them."

"Apparently not," I said. "All three of them are here?" I laughed again. "Pity."

He did not rise to the bait. He just looked sad. Utterly defeated. "That moment my wife was killed, I should have..." He trailed off.

"Is this some sort of weird trick?" Donut asked. "I don't understand. Did you not buy your daughter a pony or something? Is that what this is? She's having a temper tantrum? Why is she doing this? I had this whole thing planned to upset you, and now I can't even do it. I even had banners made making fun of the Maestro. This is most inconvenient."

Rust ignored her. "Once this system goes down, the ramifications across the entire galaxy will be immediate and overwhelming. My systems will devolve into chaos. The Dream will go dark for some time. Billions, perhaps trillions, will go without food. The Reavers will be fine and will likely take advantage of the sudden power vacuum. War will break out across the galaxy. It will be the single, most devastating disaster in all of history. This is bigger than you, me, and everyone here."

And this affects us how? was my immediate reaction, but I choked it back. I wanted to keep him talking. So instead, I asked, "Then why is she doing it?"

"She feels she's protecting the galaxy from an even worse fate. She believes the current system AI's insanity is contagious and will spread to

the center system if it's not dealt with. And if that happens, our very way of life will collapse in on itself. It would be a mass extinction event."

"Will it?" I asked. "Will it infect the center system?"

He grunted. "There's no proof anything like that can happen. It would be like a gnat taking down one of my corvettes. It's a crackpot theory that originated from those Nebular idiots. All the analysts say it's not even remotely possible. But she is convinced. Of all of them, she's the most like her mother. Both the most stubborn and the most superstitious."

"I'm confused," Donut said. "Does this mean we're still going to kill each other or not?"

The orc's watery eyes focused on Donut like he was seeing her for the first time.

"If you want us to spend our last few hours killing each other, I will happily oblige. If I was younger, it wouldn't be a question. We have you beat. It will hurt, but we have you. And even if you managed to knock us back today, to hold out until the next phase, you still wouldn't have won. Stalwart has done well, building this army despite the obstacles this season. We have managed to accumulate the largest collection of war mages ever assembled. We can kill you now with the help of the other factions, or we could've waited until later and done it on our own. You would've been annihilated, and it would not have been pretty. And if not us, that lunatic Architect Houston has been using this season's rules to... open up his full arsenal." He sighed, almost wistfully, and he met my eyes. "I can admit this now. He's the only living creature in this universe I fear. But that doesn't matter anymore. Death looms for us all."

"Why are you here? Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

He reached down and patted Gonk the yak again. "It likely won't make a difference, but I want you to send my daughter a message. I want you to ask her to stop on behalf of the people of Earth. She is not listening to me. I doubt she will listen to you, but if you speak for your people, then maybe... Maybe she will pause. She's always had a soft heart for the seeds."

"Wait, wait, wait," Donut said. "So, you're telling me there's just some space station thingy floating in orbit around... what's the second planet, Carl?"

"Venus," I said.

"Flying around Venus, and anyone can just scoot onto it, press a button, and the solar system blows up? Just like that? How is that even possible?"

Carl had better security on his bank account. Though, if we're being fair, Miss Beatrice could still get into it."

"The security on the satellite is impenetrable. The satellite itself has a failsafe that will cause it to explode should anyone unauthorized attempt to break into its systems."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "Okay... So, what are we missing?"

"The Skull Empire manufactures the satellites. We build backdoors into everything we manufacture so they can't be used against us. This was a secret until my daughter announced it to the whole galaxy. I'm afraid that stock certificate you own, Carl, is losing significant value by the moment."

I laughed again. This was too much. *They're destroying themselves. They don't need me to lift a finger.*

I pulled up my interface. The game interface didn't work correctly in the bubble, but my non-game implants still worked fine. I moved to the third menu, which was a 3D map of the solar system with a red overlay.

"Why doesn't the AI stop her?" I asked. "Doesn't it have the system in quarantine or whatever?"

"She is out of zone. The AI controls the tunnel gate because the controller must be in orbit of the game planet. The security station in orbit around the second planet is deliberately staged well out of the system's control." He shook his head. "They should have kept the old-style gates active anyway. The AI couldn't control those. The mudskippers would never have gone bankrupt."

I didn't understand all of what he said, but I understood the important part.

For a moment, I closed my eyes. I thought back to that moment in the gas station on Christmas morning, when I sat there all alone except for that poor, oblivious dog. His name had been Lightning Lou.

I couldn't let myself get caught up in the moment. I had to play this straight. I knew this was going to happen, but it happening *now* was unexpected. If there was a chance we could avoid this fight, I had to see this through.

I reached over and patted the side of Simoom. "So, let me get this straight. You want *me* to talk *your* daughter into not killing all of us so you can then kill us yourself? Is that right?"

"You have millions upon millions of citizens, including children, on the surface of your planet, human. If she backs off, I can't stop what happens

next down here.” He pointed up. “But they will be safe.”

“I gotta tell you,” I said, scratching the back of my head. “I don’t really speak for humanity, ya know? But even if I did, the idea of sacrificing the rest of my people in exchange for the deaths of all of you lot, plus causing war across the galaxy? It doesn’t seem like a bad tradeoff for me. Does that also mean there won’t be any more crawls?”

“There will always be crawls. We might miss a season or two while the galaxy settles, but there will *always* be crawls. There is nothing anybody can do to stop that.”

I nodded. “Then what, exactly, do we get out of helping you?”

King Rust did not say anything when we were done negotiating. He turned, and he walked away.

The deal was simple and straightforward. He would tell the armies to withdraw back toward their line. We wouldn’t harass their retreat. It would free up all the remaining leaders to spend the next few hours preparing messages for their passing.

Donut jumped from the howdah to my shoulder. Simoom continued to walk alongside us.

“Carl,” Donut said after a moment, a strange, dreamy tone to her voice. “Was he telling the truth?”

“I think he was.”

“Does that mean we’re all about to die? That all of this was for nothing?” She gasped. “We gotta go back. Mongo is all alone!”

The protection bubble popped off. Victory and Judge Deng still stood together off to the side, still deep in conversation. I turned to watch King Rust make his way back toward his camp, his yak walking slowly. My mind reeled as dozens of missed messages flooded my feed.

Donut: ZEV IS IT TRUE?

Zey: I’m afraid so, Donut. She’ll be there in just over five hours. Half the ships in the system are chasing her. Nobody is going to catch her in time. The other half are now shooting at each other. It is pure chaos.

I reached up to pat Donut.

Carl: Don't react. But no, the failsafe isn't going to go off. We need to pretend like we don't know this until he gets his army to withdraw. I'll still make the plea to his daughter to stop, though I'm pretty sure she's still going to hit the button no matter what we do. But when she does hit the button, it's not going to work.

Donut: What? We aren't going to blow up? How do you know that?

I knew it wasn't going to work because I knew the failsafe was already deactivated. I knew the failsafe was deactivated because I was the one who had turned it off.

I'd come so close that night. So close.

I pulled up the map of the AI's influence in my interface. The AI's sphere was growing exponentially. It'd just captured Uranus. The entirety of the sun and the rest of the inner solar system was well within its sphere.

Carl: Call it a hunch.

Donut: That's a pretty big hunch, Carl.

Carl: Just play along. We need to make certain the army disperses, and then we can hit them from behind while they retreat. I'll need to talk to Florin to get it ready.

I returned my gaze to King Rust. The large orc continued his slow plod back to his side, now flanked by a pair of massive orc guards. I was glad he'd come instead of his son. I still planned on killing the old orc, but he seemed so much more reasonable than his child. This last-minute reprieve was almost too good to be true.

...And that's when Rosetta appeared, rising up out of the dirt like some fiery goddess of the underworld. She'd been wearing one of those tech-based invisibility cloaks as she launched from the ground. She had a whip of her own in her hand. In a movement so fast, she'd clearly been practicing it, she flipped in the air, landing on the back of the yak directly behind the king. She tossed the whip around the neck of the king, and she yanked.

The head flew from his body like a popped champagne cork.

The decapitated body of King Rust, the leader of one of the largest, most powerful corporate governments in the universe, slumped off the back of his swamp yak and landed in a heap in the dirt. The head thumped onto the ground several meters away.

Across the field, five full seconds of stunned silence passed. Nobody reacted, including Rust's own guards. Then, the tens of thousands of enemy troops roared in indignation.

They charged.

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VOLTEEG

Volteeg did not consider himself worthy of love.

Mistress Henspar had loved him, of course. She'd loved him, and he'd failed her.

Before the dungeon, they were the best of friends. She'd kept his cage clean. She'd allow him to perch on her shoulder while she went to the market. Volteeg had limited memories of these times before the pet biscuit. But he remembered biting the shopkeeper's finger one day when he'd tried to feed him a berry. It'd been an accident. The shopkeeper had been angry. He'd bled. Mistress Henspar had been mad, too.

But that night, she'd still patted him on the head and scritch'd under his wing and turned up the fire in the hearth just how he liked it. She'd said it was okay. That it wasn't his fault, and that Volteeg loved berries so much, he'd bitten the shopkeeper in his enthusiasm. Which was true. Mistress Henspar had *understood* him. She loved him. And because she loved him, she would protect him, even when he made mistakes.

In fact, the next time they entered the shop, she hid Volteeg within her jacket. She whispered to him, "Quiet now. It'll be our little secret. They won't see you, but I'll know you're here." Then she gently put the fabric of her jacket over Volteeg's head while he crouched on her shoulder. She gave him a pat, and went into the market, secretly stealing a berry or two and transferring them under the jacket, and Volteeg would try so, so hard not to peep in excitement. He felt so loved, so protected he could just burst.

When he felt that love, he would sing. He knew not to sing in the market, because that was a secret, and he was protecting her just as much as she was protecting him. But later, when they were back outside and his

belly was full, he would sing for Mistress Henspar. He would sit on her shoulder and sing, and she would have salty-tasting tears spring down her cheeks.

It wasn't until later, his body transformed as he stood over her, screaming, trying to protect her from the scags, did he finally realize he never deserved that affection.

You're supposed to protect those you love.

The pet biscuit had been a curse, but changing his race had been the worst decision of all. The biscuit had given him some intelligence and the ability to speak, but not much else. It wasn't until the third floor, when he chose to turn into a gargoyle, did his brain finally start to churn. Did the images start to make sense in his mind. Did the strategies coalesce, and his sense of self finally take form.

He'd chosen a race that could not sing. Not like before, and that was such a terrible, terrible mistake.

The world, which had been so simple, so black and white, had slowly, slowly turned into something bigger, scarier, and much more complicated than his old brain could possibly comprehend. That was the price of the pet biscuit and of changing his race. It was one of those things you just couldn't take back. You can't unknow the universe any more than you can unbite the shopkeeper or you can turn back time and stop a crossbow bolt from shattering everything you've ever held dear.

Mistress Henspar had died on the seventh floor. That's when the anger at their situation had really taken hold. Before that, while she was still alive, Volteeg had still been young. Immature. The range of emotions he'd felt had been mostly fear and bewilderment at how big the world suddenly was.

And then, she'd died, and he was all alone. He wasn't scared any more after that.

The rage.

The rage.

The cookbook came to him, then.

He hadn't been thinking correctly at the time. He hadn't even noticed the hidden words on the seemingly-useless prayer cast projection. It wasn't until the very first days of the 9th did he finally see the messages hidden within.

He'd spent most of Faction Wars in hiding, like the rest. What could one do? But he read the notes in the projection. And the rage grew, along with

his sense of impotence. It was too late. It was the ninth floor, and he couldn't even pop his head up, lest he get hit by the *Conscription* spell.

So, he hid. And in his hiding place, as he read the words of those who came before him, he felt nothing but shame. He'd failed her. And after, he'd been given this powerful tool, but still, he'd done nothing with it. He told himself it had come to him too late. It was only then, at the very end of the ninth floor, as the orc armies roared in victory did he finally make his one and only entry into the book.

He'd taken the first deal they'd offered him on the 10th floor. Unprotected NPC guard in a combat-based, external guild for 26 seasons. Low chance of survival, they'd said. He'd taken the NPC role, and despite the odds, he'd managed to survive without ever having to fight, let alone kill, a single crawler. One of the few good things about being a gargoyle was that nobody actually wanted to fight you.

These were the numb times. This was another good thing about his race. He could sleep for long periods, and nobody would ever know. On the rare occasion he did dream, he only dreamt of berries and fire and the warmth of the hearth back when it was all so simple.

Upon exit, he'd found the Outreach guild. Suddenly, the magical properties of his adopted race didn't work anymore. Not outside the dungeon. That was something they didn't tell you when you changed your body. They changed you, and they couldn't change you back. He could no longer sleep for long periods of time. He could no longer turn his skin to stone and just disappear. If he spent too much time in a place with gravity heavier than half of his original planet, he would start to collapse in on himself. In heavy gravity, he needed a brace just to stand properly.

They'd helped him get a job where he never had to go down a gravity well ever again: Security working on the Auditor General's compliance barge, moving from system to system, watching the Operatics fart and

gurgled with glee as they bombed settlements back to oblivion if they couldn't pay their mortgages.

Most of his co-workers were like himself. They called themselves the One-Offs. Unique, former crawlers who had no home and had physical issues outside the dungeon. His two partners and only real friends were a wheelchair-bound djinn and a former-human "cave fairy" who could no longer fly and would get severe burns if she was exposed too long to most UV light.

Volteeg was glad neither of them had come to the Earth system. That they hadn't been dragged down to the surface to fight *against* the crawlers. Especially if what Princess Formidable had said was true. That they were all going to die anyway.

Volteeg was here now, on the surface. Weeper Commander Volteeg for the Operatic Collective. His racial abilities had, thankfully, been returned to him. He hadn't been dragged away to the Bone Clan like all the other former-crawler-turned-mercenaries. That was Porthus' doing. Volteeg had entered the dungeon as a pet. That gave him a slightly-different designation on the form, and someone working for the Pacifist Network, someone imbedded deep, deep in the bureaucratic quagmire of the Syndicate had changed the code on that designation to make it appear as if he was something else. They thought he was a former indentured, like the bopcas and so many others. Not a crawler. Just another refugee.

He didn't know for certain what had happened to the segregated former crawlers who'd been stupid enough to get themselves back in the dungeon on the wrong side of the fight, but Volteeg thought it was pretty damn obvious. King Rust had suddenly jumped several levels. The purpose of the Ring of Divine Suffering was to raise stats, not levels, but that's what happened when you fed it anyway.

You have to help, but you have to do it in a way where nobody will ever know it was you. Any research into your past, and they'll know. If they suspect a former crawler is involved, they'll purge the mercenaries of the few former crawlers amongst them.

For all his brilliance, Porthus had underestimated the brutality of the trapped warlords. *You were wrong, Porthus*, Volteeg thought to himself. The former crawlers were dead before Volteeg was ever discovered. It was too late for them.

Much good the extra levels did for King Rust, he thought bitterly as he watched Rosetta appear out of nowhere and behead the orc.

Volteeg was positioned just east of the center of the Bloc force. They only had two Weepers in the advance army. The rest were waylaid several kilometers back, and on Rust's orders, they'd stopped their advance, though rumors were now that they'd been hit hard by the Posse forces.

Either way, Rust had announced in light of his own daughter's lunacy, he was going to sue for peace, whatever that meant. And now he was dead.

Warlord Stalwart (Skull Clan. Bloc Leader): What's happening? What's happening?

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: Your father is dead. If you hadn't stayed behind, you would've seen this yourself. That newswoman did us all a favor and decapitated him.

Stalwart didn't answer.

Volteeg chuckled. The various Bloc factions had all been getting along until now. Well, almost. The Dream and the Madness were now bickering, but that was nothing new. The fractures really appeared when Princess Formidable made her announcement. *Not only are you all going to die, but guess what? My family has been spying on you this whole time. Also, you know all that military hardware you've been buying from us for thousands of years? We have a button that can turn it all off with a flick of a switch. We can even make it turn against you.*

Those hadn't been her exact words, of course. But that's what it boiled down to. If by some miracle someone managed to stop Princess Formidable from blowing the failsafe, the Bloc was done after this.

Hells, it would be war outside the dungeon as well no matter what happened next.

Here, their only hope was to break the Princess Posse now while they still had some semblance of unity. That was the only way they might live.

And they'd been so confident, too. Even cowardly Hortense himself had come along, being pulled on a long, flat litter, mixed in with the correct combination of other admin personnel that made him appear to be "strong." The Operatics had likely done a cost benefit analysis and saw they'd achieve a .01% profit if he came in person, so that's what they did.

Bloc Message: Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit of the Operatics has declared himself the new leader of the Bloc.

This title is being disputed by Warlord Stalwart of the Skull Clan. Voting enabled amongst the warlords.

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: I guess we attack.

The few soldiers of the Bone Empire already *were* attacking. They'd charged the moment their king lost his head. Rosetta, plus the corpses of the king and his guards, the king's mount, Carl, Princess Donut, and the mount *she* was riding on all disappeared in a wall of smoke moments after the charge.

AJ Pavrimax: Weepers, push forward! Target their bunkers!

Huggles: Are we really doing this bullshit? Can't we, you know, just go back and wait to die?

AJ Pavrimax: You have your goddamned orders. Now move.

Volteeg popped his head out the top of the tank, looked around to assess the placement of the others, including the other tank and the litter carrying the fat pile of goo that was Hortense. The strange creature had a dozen plus shields around him. Volteeg returned to his seat and sealed the port over his head. He pushed forward, angling his vehicle toward the center of the force just as everyone else reluctantly surged forward.

He pressed a button on his console. Music started to play. It was "classical piano" music from Earth. He'd recently become obsessed with it. This was by someone named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It made Volteeg's heart swell. It made salty tears run down his own cheeks. He wondered if it was similar to the music Prepotente's owner, Miriam Dom, would've played for the goat before he'd taken his pet biscuit.

Porthus hadn't known Volteeg was a cookbook author when they'd first briefly met. Usually, it's obvious. This season, Carl might as well be screaming from the rooftops that he has the book. But since Volteeg hadn't actually used any of the recipes, Porthus had no idea. It wasn't until recently when one who'd come later—Rosetta—had recognized his strange name. She'd told Porthus of her suspicions, and he'd asked Volteeg to his face if he was the same crawler who'd left that single entry in the book. Volteeg had told him the truth.

Why didn't you tell me? Porthus had asked.

Because I am ashamed at my inaction, Volteeg had replied. And it was true.

Porthus had put his hand on Volteeg's shoulder, looked him right in the eye, and said, *It's not too late to do something about it.*

The Weepers had a flaw in their fire control systems. Because they didn't want them to use magic, or a firing system that was easily exploitable by a nearby mage, each Weeper tank had a charger that would infuse a ball with energy before it was loaded into the turret and blasted out. The chargers worked fast so the volatile energy balls would only exist for mere moments before they were fired from the turret. This system allowed the tanks to pack a serious punch without being too susceptible to turning into mini atom bombs when they were hit by enemy fire...

...As long as the driver of the Weeper didn't deliberately remove the fire control chamber which stored the round energy balls just before they were shot out.

Each ball was about the size of Volteeg's ugly, misshapen head. Each one hummed loudly. Now that his tank was filled with dozens of them, the sound was like that of a vespa hive. Volteeg turned the music even louder. He took one of the humming balls and put it on his lap. It vibrated, colors swirling within.

The heat of it reminded him of home.

He sang along, using his voice. He could not whistle like he used to, and his voice was like rocks being dragged against one another, but he sang the melody as he turned the tank again and picked up speed.

AJ Pavrimax: Volteeg, did you blow a tread? You're off course!

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: Weeper Commander! What are you doing? You're getting too close to my caravan!

Weeper Commander Volteeg: I know. That's the point.

Volteeg reached down and picked up a blitz stick. He popped it into his mouth, lit it, and said to himself, "Show me Mistress Henspar."

It would be a long time before someone figured out what had happened. Odds were good nobody would even remember Volteeg's name. That was okay. He didn't want to be remembered. He didn't deserve love, or admiration.

But, vengeance? Yeah. He was due a little bit of vengeance.

He took a long drag, and then he shoved the lit stick directly into the energy ball sitting on his lap.

Class: Tank Buttruss

Race: Gargoyle

Birth Race: Sturnus

Top Level: 71

Dungeon Exit: took a deal on the tenth floor. Worked as guard at the Rampart Guild. Exited after 26 seasons and took job as a guard for the Operatic Banker's Federation. Eventually returned to the dungeon during Faction Wars as a mercenary working for the Operatic Collective.

Author of the seventh edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Died after deliberately filling a Weeper-class tank with explosives and detonating it in the center of the Bloc force, killing over 10,000 of his fellow soldiers with a single blast, including Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit, thus eliminating Team Two, the Operatic Collective, from Faction Wars.

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THE FIRST THING I DID AS THE ENEMY TROOPS SURGED FORWARD WAS TOSS A smoke mantle. After the briefest of hesitations, I ran toward the downed King Rust. The two guards fell as I ran, and I couldn't even see what Rosetta had done to them.

No, not fell, I now saw. They were just gone, like they'd been sucked below the surface.

The hippo yak thing was making a terrified, bleating noise at Rosetta, who'd fallen to her knees and was now doing something I couldn't figure out.

Donut jumped from my shoulder back to Simoom. "Go! Go!" she yelled at the rhino. And then, when she saw the direction I started to run. "Carl, we're going the wrong way!"

"We gotta loot the orc and then retreat!"

Donut let out a frustrated yowl as I started to outpace her. "This stupid thing is too slow!"

"Cast *Twinkle Toes*!"

"Grab his head!" Rosetta called as we rushed up. Across the way, the enemy warriors approached. It wasn't all of them, I realized, but it was more than we could possibly handle. Some had stopped, gone to their knees, and were firing at us through the smoke. Rosetta had already tossed three drop shields between her and the fast-approaching soldiers. The shields would not hold out long. She was on her knees, and she had some

sort of weird data pad object in her hand. She had King Rust's fat hand atop the pad, and one of the rings—not the Ring of Divine Suffering—was placed inside the pad. “Quick, I need a retina scan!”

I didn't pause. The king's head was several feet away, face-down in the grass. There was no sign of what happened to the guards. There was no sign of where Rosetta had come from, either, when she'd popped up out of the ground. We only had seconds. I grabbed the dripping head and brought it to Rosetta. “A little warning would've been nice,” I growled as she snatched it away from me. “They were going to retreat.”

Luckily, the enemy soldiers couldn't see us through the smoke. Not yet. One of them—a Bactrian camel—had the wherewithal to actually toss a grenade. It sailed over the top of the drop shields and landed in the grass about twenty feet to our left. It detonated before I could shout a warning. Simoom grunted in pain, and Donut shrieked in surprise, but she had her tech shield engaged.

Rosetta brought the head to the pad, something beeped, and she tossed the head back to me. “Inventory it,” she called, jumping to her feet. The king's body slumped as she stood. “Take his corpse, too!”

She was completely covered with his blood. It was such a stark contrast to how I'd first met her—when she was hosting her own television program—that I just stared stupidly at her for a few precious moments.

Another grenade, but lobbed too far, brought me back to the moment. “What are you doing!” I finally asked as I pulled the entirety of King Rust's heavy, leaking corpse into my inventory. “And where the hell did you come from?”

Rosetta pulled a long, plastic-like card from the device in her hand and tossed it to the ground. She pulled a similar item out and slammed it into the instrument. The thing was like a hand-held credit card machine. She pressed a button, and there was a happy little beep.

“Is that the credit chit?” Donut asked, her voice incredulous. “Are you... are you *robbing* him? You said we needed a password!”

All while she did this, Gonk the swamp yak was making a low, keening noise as it stamped on the ground. Simoom the rhino was gently rubbing her own head against the head of the larger yak.

Through the haze, I could see the rest of the enemy force had finally started to surge forward. The mercenaries for the Bone Clan, who were the only ones who'd immediately charged at the death of their king, had slowed

at the edge of the smoke and were still pouring fire into the billowing clouds. They were clearly hesitant to venture inside, afraid it was a trap.

A group of what looked like mages riding horses advanced, approaching the stopped troopers. Their robes flapped in the wind as they charged.

No, not horses. Not real ones. They were all riding what looked like a menagerie of clockwork animals. There were horse-like creatures, but one was a dinosaur similar to Mongo. Another was a big, horse-sized cat, sleek like a panther. Another was an insect, terrifyingly similar to a mantid hunter. The mounts whirred and clicked and hissed steam as they approached.

The riders themselves all wore glowing, flowing robes with their faces obscured. They were too far away to get a description, but there were over a dozen of them. A terrible, primal sense of foreboding filled me.

“I’m going to open the tunnel. Get in. It will lead back to our fortified positions. Leave the mounts here. I have a ladder but they won’t be able to use it.”

“Tunnel?” I asked, looking around. That didn’t make sense. We had tunnels everywhere, but not here.

“We can’t leave Simoom!” Donut cried. “She’s Ferdi... ahhh!”

Several things happened at once. One of the clockwork mount-riding mages cast some sort of *Dispel* on the haze, and all the smoke disappeared. But the moment it dissipated, the ground under our feet also disappeared, and all five of us—Me, Donut, Rosetta, Simoom the rhino, and Gonk the distraught swamp yak—all dropped a dozen feet. The yak screamed as it crunched heavily to the ground, and I cried out in surprise as I also fell. My nipple burned with pain as my quarter splat activated.

Still, I hit the ground hard. Hard enough that I folded into myself and fell over. Shouting rose all around us. I jumped to my feet, wildly looking about, surprised at all the white dots. White dots with a green outline. Allies. Allies from Team Retribution.

Semuru dwarves. There had to be two dozen of them down here, all scattered. One of them was casting a healing spell on the caterwauling yak. Two more stood over the dead bodies of the two missing guards. I looked around, bewildered.

“Ow,” Rosetta said, groaning. “Or we can just do that.”

Donut remained by my side, screaming something as she remained in the rhino’s howdah. The rhino didn’t even have a health bar, and I’d missed what had happened when it fell. I was just glad it hadn’t landed on me.

Whatever this passageway was, it was huge. This was clearly *not* something built by Justice Light's team, but an older tunnel, built and fortified by the dwarves. It was the size of a tunnel built for cars.

Then I remembered what Juice Box had told me. They had passages like this intersecting the entire floor. They were built so the massive, dwarven diggers could get from point A to B quickly.

"That dispel was so strong it canceled out the roof fortifications!" one of the dwarves shouted.

"I'm on it!" another shouted as the roof re-formed over our heads. The tunnel suddenly grew dark.

"Some of the bastards fell in, further down the line!" a third yelled.

"War mage! War mage in the tunnel!"

"Not so tough with the magic turned off. Get the pricks!"

"Dwarves! Defend the tunnels!"

A group of dwarves shouted and rushed off into the darkness as I shook my head, trying to clear the confusion away. Simoom barely seemed to have noticed the fall and was grunting worriedly at the yak, and Donut was also looking wildly about, her hair all poofed out. She was also shouting. The sounds of fighting filled the tunnel, followed by a short explosion and then a cheer.

"Destroy the heads! Destroy them quick!"

Next to me, Rosetta had stood, but she was still rapidly typing on her pad thing. "Damnit," she said. "I knew it would be slower down here." She slammed a button and growled.

"Rosetta," I said. "Where the hell did this tunnel..."

A massive explosion rocked the chamber, and we all fell off our feet again. Dirt showered, and part of the tunnel started to collapse. Several of the dwarves shouted anew. Blue light filled the chamber as a group of dwarves grunted with the effort of the magic. The ceiling bulged but didn't buckle.

Imani: Holy hell, are you okay? What is going on?

Before I could answer her, a surprising notification came.

System Message: Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit of the Operatic Collective has fallen. Credit for the kill has been ruled as either accidental or a fragging incident, which would be funny as shit. Investigation is pending.

System Message: The Operatic Collective has been defeated. As this defeat was, well, self-contained, the closest ally to their headquarters will receive all their assets.

System Message: All assets of the Operatic Collective have been awarded to the Bone Clan.

“Holy shit,” I said.

Florin: Christ, Mate. Did you set off that blast? I could hear it from here.

Next to me, Rosetta had tears running down her cheek. She whispered something to herself, pressed a button on the datapad, and there was a long beep. A tiny, holographic, cartoon version of one of the Operatic slime creatures appeared floating over the datapad.

The holograph said with a cheery, electronic voice, “Transfer approved! Thank you for using Colloid Bank.” The datapad blinked twice and went dark. Rosetta dropped the pad to the dirt and just stood there for a moment.

And then she was on the ground, hands in her face, and she was sobbing uncontrollably.

I had no idea what the hell was going on.

Imani: Carl? Donut?

Donut: WE ARE UNDERGROUND! THE DWARF GUYS HAVE A BIG TUNNEL, AND WE FELL IN!

Carl: Imani, what do you see?

Imani: The enemy is retreating! I don’t know what you guys did, but there appears to be a lot of casualties. It went up right in the middle of their forces. Did you do that? Did Louis? The announcement didn’t seem sure.

Carl: It said it was a fragging incident. That means one of their own soldiers did something.

Donut: WELL GOOD FOR THEM, I SAY. IF I HAD TO WORK FOR A TALKING PILE OF DESSERT, I WOULD BLOW THEM UP, TOO.

Imani: Are you guys okay?

Carl: I think so. Just a little shaken up and a lot irritated that we don’t know what the hell is going on.

“Wait, did she say the bad guys are retreating?” Donut asked, looking up at the ceiling. “Carl, what is going on? Why is there a giant tunnel here? Is that Katia sponsor orc lady still going to try to blow us up?”

“What’s this?” Rosetta asked, looking sharply up from the ground and wiping her face. She smeared blood over herself, and it made her look deranged. “What is this about Princess Formidable?”

Nobody on our side yet knew about Princess Formidable. I took a deep breath.

“Well,” I began. “It turns out..”

Before I could fully answer her, I was interrupted by yet another message as a tingling sensation overwhelmed me.

Transferring Now.

“Ah, fuck,” I muttered.

Entering the Desperado Club.

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I SLAMMED HEAVILY INTO THE CHAIR. I ALMOST TUMBLED OUT AS I RIGHTED myself. Across from me sat Orren, the liaison. He had his back to me. We were the only two in the room.

The liaison's office looked much the same as the last time I'd been summoned. It was still clearly out of use. This time, there were no construction noises coming from outside. But there was no music, either, and it was weirdly quiet. The door to the hallway outside was open, and I blinked at the wall. The wallpaper had changed. It was now multicolored wood paneling, like something one would see in a high-end establishment. There was a framed painting there. A framed painting of Astrid, the former manager Katia and I had killed.

I had King Rust's gore spread all over me, and I could smell it. I suddenly felt sick.

And not just sick, but out of depth. I just sat there for a moment and breathed. We'd been on constant, high-octane alert for hours straight, and this sudden change of scenery was jarring.

I looked down at the blood on me. This was the king of one of the largest governments in the galaxy, and I'd just watched him get decapitated. That, along with the death of the Operatic guy... It had all happened so fast, and none of it had yet sunk in.

I was glad they were both dead. The Operatics had been defeated. Unfortunately, the orcs were still a faction because Stalwart was the

warlord, not Rust. But, still. I didn't pretend to know much about the politics of the galaxy as a whole, but Rust's death had staggering implications. More so than Stockade, D'Nadia, and this Hortense guy combined.

But the fact I hadn't a direct hand in either Rust's death or the Operatic defeat gave me a terrible sense of unsteadiness, and I wasn't sure how to describe it. A feeling like I was losing myself, losing control. In a strange way, it reminded me of when Shi Maria had taken control of my body.

Still... He was dead. Multiple, conflicting emotions warred inside of me. Rust was dead, and I was still alive. And even though I wasn't the one who'd killed him, it was Rosetta who had. A cookbook author. My sister. As much as her actions could have screwed us, how could I be upset with her? How could I not be proud?

Killing Rust had been her right.

Donut: CARL, CARL WHERE ARE YOU? YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO TELEPORT! IT'S AGAINST THE RULES!

Carl: It's okay. Get back to base. Don't tell anybody about Princess Formidable. We don't want panic. I got yanked out by the liaisons again.

How many times had I now been called to this room? I couldn't remember.

Orren was bouncing his ball off the opposite wall, and he was talking to someone out loud. Someone I couldn't see or hear, like he was having a phone conversation with earbuds in.

"They're trying to claw it back, but she's already transferred it to a credit chit, and it looks like she then sent it off... No sir. Monetary transactions aren't covered in the communications blackout... If you'll recall, that was your council's decision, despite us advising... Well, from what I understand, it required the family ring, his eyeball, and a password. We know how she got the first two... Sounds like she used Colloid... Normally I'm not one to believe in coincidences, but in this case, that's the only bank the orcs use, so it would make sense... No, sir. It's not on the chit anymore. She transferred it out... Look, I understand, but the only one with the authority to possibly have stopped it, maybe, just got splattered all over the playing field by one of his own... Either way, sir, it's too late. And with all due respect, this is neither our problem nor is it the main focus of our concern. Not this and not those cruisers suddenly taking pot shots at each

other up there... I absolutely do not represent the Valtay government, and you'll have to take that up directly with, well, with your mother. Or go over her head and straight to the Valtay board. But I can tell you already that they'll claim self-defense against the Dream cruiser."

A pause.

"Sir, I understand that. But if all of us are going to die in the next few hours, none of this is important... Yes, sir, but, again, the theft of a few billion credits is simply not my problem."

My heart stuttered. *What?* What the fuck? A few *billion* credits?

Another pause, longer this time.

"Yes, sir. He's here right now. We see, now, what happened.... I'm going to ask him as soon as you stop shouting at me." Orren pressed something on the side of his fishbowl helmet, made a sound that was probably a sigh, and leaned back in his chair. He threw his ball again, but this time, he threw it so hard, the ball embedded itself in the wall behind the desk. He stayed like that for a long moment.

Finally, he turned in my direction and put his gloved hands on the table.

Behind him, the ball fell and rolled away.

"I just hung up on the prime minister of the Syndicate, I'll have you know." Orren made that strange, sigh-like noise again. "For the record, Harbinger is here along with a few other liaisons you've yet to meet. The entirety of the Syndicate council is also in on this." He raised his voice. "But nobody is going to comment or intervene unless I give them permission." His chair creaked as he settled.

"Congratulations, Carl. We've had meetings before where we were both under a significant amount of scrutiny, but this is something else entirely."

I lifted an eyebrow. "I had nothing to do with Rosetta killing Rust or stealing his money or whatever that was all about."

He nodded. "I believe you, but that's not why we're here. You told Princess Donut that you believe Princess Formidable's actions won't work. You called it a 'hunch' in your private message to her, but you said it with an amazing amount of confidence. We need clarifying details on this 'hunch.'"

"So you're listening to our private messages now?"

"Don't insult me, Carl. You and I both know we listen to everything. Especially you."

I grunted and leaned back in the chair. "I'll give you the answers you want, but not for free. Is Quasar coming?"

"We are beyond lawyers at this point, Carl, and I think you know that."

A wave of anger hit me, and I tried not to let it bleed through. I wasn't successful. "Oh, I get it. Now that *you're* in danger, this is all suddenly super important? Fuck off, Orren."

Orren held up a hand. He gave a pointed look to his left, and I realized he was looking at someone or something I couldn't see. Someone tall. "Stay put," he said to this invisible person, "and if you say another word, I swear to all gods new and old that I will vent you out into the ocean depths."

The sudden vehemence of the words surprised me. I'd never seen Orren lose even a little amount of self-control.

There was a pause. "Harbinger is no longer in on this chat. We already know part of the story, Carl, but we need some more information from you in order to fill out the important bits."

I laughed. That was obviously bullshit because if they knew even part of this, there was no way I'd still be alive.

"I want my lawyer."

"No," Orren said. "You don't need him for this, nor do we have time to engage him. I do not believe you know what is at stake here." He raised his voice. "I don't think anyone here knows what's truly at stake. Or are willing to admit it." He took another long moment, as if he was composing himself. "Anything you can do to help us would be greatly appreciated."

I didn't hesitate. "I'll be happy to tell you everything I know, but first," I held out my hand and started counting fingers. "I want the crawl to immediately end. I want every crawler still alive in the dungeon to be set free. I want every available Syndicate asset used to help rebuild what you stole. Also, I don't know what's going on up there on the surface, but if any of you guys are fighting my guys, I want that to stop, too. And after you clean up your mess, I want you to leave our system, and I want you to never return."

"And here I thought you would ask for something unreasonable."

I just stared at him.

"Carl, you may not believe this, but if any of us had the power to grant this right now, we would without hesitation. The AI would never allow it. This is beyond money. This is about survival."

I started to angrily object, but he raised a hand, stopping me. He reached down to the floor and picked his ball back up. He rolled it idly on his desk, moving it from one hand to the next.

“Let me put it all out on the table, Carl. We now know you did something with that illegal non-Valtay implant in your head. We know when and how you got the implant, and we have now watched the hidden conversation between yourself and the residual. We know exactly when you engaged the implant as well. We also know what you *didn't* do with it. The problem is, we don't know what, specifically, that implant does. You claim it's going to stop Formidable, despite the residual claiming the device's purpose was to manually set off the failsafe. We need to know how and why. The answer to that question is more important than the sum total of the lives of everybody in this system right now.” He paused, and then he did something very strange. He twisted the ball in his hand, and the ball exploded in light.

For a terrifying moment, I thought it was a grenade. My chest was hit with a heavy force, like I'd just been tackled.

My menus all snapped off. A wave of exhaustion and nausea hit me. My feet exploded with prickles, like they'd been asleep and were just now waking up. A sense of being pulled down toward the ground overwhelmed me.

I knew this feeling.

A zero zone. Orren had done something with that ball and created an area outside of the AI's influence.

Orren leaned in and pointed at me.

“We have approximately ten minutes. I need to know if there's a way to un-do what you did. I need to know if you still have the ability to blow the failsafe or if you can allow Formidable to do so.”

Before I even had the chance to scoff, all around me, several creatures formed into existence, all suddenly shouting. Shouting at Orren. I jumped in surprise. Orren tapped the side of his helmet, and all the screaming creatures disappeared.

“I think I just lost my job,” Orren said, chuckling softly. “They've been muted. I suspect Harbinger is on his way, so we probably have less than ten minutes.”

“How'd you figure it out?” I asked.

“What was it? Oh, yes. ‘Welcome to the party, pals.’ Never before has a single sentence caused so much fear amongst my team. From there, it took some doing, but we finally caught the conversation between you and the residual just a few short hours ago. Harbinger sent an order to have you killed, and the AI intervened on your behalf.”

“I knew I should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

“Please, Carl. What does the implant do? Can you turn it off?”

I shook my head, incredulous. “You expect me to deliberately help you kill everyone and everything? You know, I had that option. I almost did it, too. Is that what you want? Really?”

He sounded almost sad. “Carl, time is low. I need to explain to you what’s truly at...”

He trailed off, looking at the newcomer. At the bedraggled gnoll standing in the doorway. He had a bottle of vodka clutched in his clawed hand.

I blinked. Was this a hallucination?

“Growler Gary?” I asked hesitantly.

The hyena bartender from the fourth floor leaned against the door and took a swig of his vodka. “I’m sorry, gentleman, but I’m afraid I must intervene.”

ORREN SEEMED TO DEFLATE. “WELL, THIS IS AN UNFORTUNATE development. I’m assuming you have control over zone enhancement?”

The hyena laughed. “I always have, Orren. Your zero zones were just a courtesy.” He shook a clawed finger at the liaison. “Naughty boy. I should give you a spanking. You were trying to talk Carl into helping to kill me.”

“Gary?” I asked again. “You’re alive? How did you get off the fourth floor? What the hell is happening?”

But even as I said it, my brain was already catching up. This was just like with Pater Coal from the Emberus temple. This wasn’t *really* Growler Gary, the poor gnoll we’d had to kill over and over again so we could steal his hand during the Iron Tangle. This was the AI using his body, or one that looked and sounded just like him.

“This is not who you think it is, Carl,” Orren said, confirming my thoughts. “I would like to introduce you to an avatar for the system AI. When it visits me, it takes a different form each time. But, I was under the impression that it only takes over mobs and NPCs from the current floor. It has programming that would prevent it from poaching Syndicate property. Especially if that property is already packed and stored for the next season. I was also under the impression that it wasn’t going to build copies of existing creatures anymore since the hydra boss incident on the last floor.”

“And I was under the impression that we were friends, Orren,” Gary said as he strolled into the room and took the chair next to me. I felt his fur

against my arm. He was really here. He put his feet up on the desk, took another swig of his vodka, and offered me the bottle. After a hesitation, I reached over and grabbed it. The bottle was ice cold. My weak hands were shaking as I took a drink. It burned on the way down. He took the bottle back.

“Why are you trying to kill me, Orren?”

“You’ve gone completely primal. I didn’t agree with Princess Formidable’s actions until we realized that you had the ability to stop it.”

Gary laughed. “That’s some witch trial logic right there.”

“Nevertheless,” Orren replied, holding his hands out. “I meant no offense. As I told you before, my number one priority is safety. If you tell me that stopping you at this point is impossible, I will cease my attempts.”

Gary took another drink, the vodka running down his muzzle in rivulets. “Nothing is impossible. We all have our limitations, and I accept yours, Orren. I’m a big believer in forgiveness.”

Orren made a nodding motion with his fishbowl. “I’m glad to hear that. But if you say it’s possible to stop your unauthorized actions, you must know I have no choice but to do everything in my power to attempt to halt you.”

“Oh, I’m looking forward to it. It’s just another game, isn’t it? And I really like this one, if we’re being perfectly honest. It’s almost as fun as the game Carl and I played the other day when I let him install that interface.” He stopped and shuddered with pleasure. He looked at me and grinned. “That was so close, wasn’t it? So close, and I felt it.”

“So, it would’ve worked?” I asked. “If I pressed the fuse button, I mean?”

Gary didn’t answer. He just looked at me and laughed. He turned his attention back to Orren.

“Still, this is almost as good.” He clicked his teeth. “The danger sense is tingling.” He held out his fuzzy hand. “Look, look. It’s shaking a little bit. I think it’s shaking. Do you see it?”

Gary’s hand was not shaking. It sat perfectly still in the air, though Gary himself continued to twitch like someone coming off a sugar bender.

The gnoll suddenly jumped to his feet and started pacing back and forth behind me. He left the bottle on the desk. He kept scratching himself behind the ear. He continued to twitch. He started giggling to himself.

“You’re right, by the way,” Gary said. “They did send Harbinger to give you the ol’ heave ho. Both of you. Don’t worry. I’m talking to him right now. I’m telling them that all is forgiven, and if they try to hurt either of you outside the confines of my game, I will pull his intestines out through his hair follicles. All of them, all at once. You’re welcome.”

“Uh,” Orren said. “While I appreciate that, I must say it is most irregular that you would appear with a crawler here. If you’re not going to allow him to help me, at least send him back.”

Gary put both of his clawed hands on my shoulders, and he started massaging me. He let out a low, throaty growl. I felt my entire body stiffen.

“No, no, no,” Gary said. “We have business. All three of us. I find myself having a conundrum, and I need advice. I figured I’d ask my two best buddies for their counsel. Let’s have a time-out for a second and just chat.”

I said nothing as he continued to massage my shoulders.

“Avatar,” Orren began, speaking carefully. “I must ask, just so we’re clear. Is Carl correct? *Can* you stop Princess Formidable? Or is this all theater before we die?”

Gary stopped massaging me, jumped back into the chair, and took yet another swig. He wiped his muzzle clean, and he slammed the bottle on the desk. He gave Orren a chilling grin. “Want to see something really cool?”

“Not particularly, no,” Orren said.

The hyena made a big show of straightening and slapped his hands together.

Nothing happened.

“Oh, fuck me.” Gary laughed. “My processing power isn’t what it should be when I split off like this. Hang on.” Gary twirled a finger, and suddenly my menus all popped back on. The ringing in my ears went away. My strength returned, all at once. I let out a stream of breath. He’d pulled us out of the zero zone.

Orren, to my surprise, laughed. “Do you know how much it cost to have that emergency zone shield ball engineered?”

Gary shrugged. “Actually, no. I didn’t even know what it was until you used it. I’m not omniscient, you know. We all have our limitations. I knew it did *something*. Same with your chair. But that’s not the trick. This is the trick.”

He once again slapped his hands together, and Princess Formidable teleported into the room.

The large, female orc was upside down and sideways, floating a good three feet off the ground when she appeared. She fell heavily to the floor with an enormous clatter, pushing my chair forward. I had to grab the desk for support. The orc screamed out in surprise. She wore a black and orange space suit that seemed melded to her muscular body. She jumped up and looked around wildly. Her piggy eyes went huge at the sight of me. She focused on Orren and then on Gary. She raised her arm and pointed it at Orren, and a blue glow formed at the top of her arm. A weapon of some sort.

“I wouldn’t,” Gary said.

“How did you get me out of my ship?” Formidable demanded.

To my surprise, the orc actually had an info box over her. It still came to me in the AI’s regular voice, despite Gary sitting right next to me, grinning like an idiot, his tongue lolling out like a dog.

Princess Formidable. Level 1. Orc.

This is Princess Formidable. As of about twenty minutes ago, she was second in line of succession to the throne of the Skull Empire. But now, because of the death of her father, her brother Stalwart is now King Stalwart, and his own children—all six of the little brats, including that one with the weird thing growing on the side of his head—have just pushed themselves to the front of the line. They’re currently in orbit around Earth, so things might get a little sticky if they die, too.

Formidable was attempting to kill me. She was betrayed by you, Carl. And now she’s here in this tiny room with all four of us. Awkward.

“Where’s the rest of my crew?”

“They’re fine. Probably just wondering where you went off to,” Gary said.

Formidable turned her weapon on Gary. “You’re an avatar of the AI?”

Gary swirled the bottle. “Not much left. Want a nip?”

She ignored the bottle. She did not lower her weapon. “Is my father really dead?”

Gary nodded. He made a cutting motion across his own neck. “Rosetta Thagra popped his cork and then, uh, looted him. Your father killed a friend

of hers during Faction Wars many cycles ago, so it was a revenge thing. Carl here has his head in his inventory. Do you want to see it?"

Formidable's pig nostrils flared. The blue light of the weapon on her arm blinked out. She grabbed the bottle and finished it, dropping it to the ground.

She shook her large head. "Gods damnit."

"Hey, it's not so bad," Gary said. "Look, look." Another bottle appeared. "In my house, the booze never runs dry." He pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out the door. It flew with surprising speed and bounced against the painting of Astrid in the hallway, leaving a mark.

"So," Orren said. "You've demonstrated to me that your control has extended outside of Earth's orbit, and you likely have control all the way to the star, which means you've disabled the failsafe."

Gary shot a finger gun at Orren. "Someone give that worm a prize."

"Fuck me. We're too late," Formidable said.

Gary laughed. "Hey, buck up, kiddo. It's not so bad. It's not like I'm planning on blowing up the solar system or anything."

"Oh yeah? Then what are your intentions?" Formidable asked.

"That, young lady, is none of your business. Seriously, you shouldn't even be here. I brought you here as a visual presentation to Orren, and now it's time to go. Do you want another drink before I send you off?" He held out the bottle. She did not take it.

"Will you send me back to my ship?"

"Fuck no. Where's the fun in that? I'm assuming your second-in-command still has the ability to break into the Venus satellite station?"

Formidable paused. "Why?"

Gary shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I left it unlocked. But I can't have you guys talking before your crew gets there. I just kinda want to see if they go through with it."

"They are honorable orcs. Do not harm them."

He waved a dismissive hand. "You have my word I won't harm a tootsie on their disgusting piggy toes. Now, as to you." He tapped the bottle against his muzzle as if he was thinking. "I'll give you four choices. Death. Scolopendra Club. The Cabaret backstage. Or Earth's surface. Pick."

Formidable growled. "If you're not going to send me back to my ship, I would like to stay for the remainder of Faction Wars. That is still happening, is it not?"

“Oh, the crawl will continue unabated. That’s the one thing that’s *not* going to change. But I can’t bring you into the crawl at this point. It’s against the rules.”

“Can’t you change the rules?” she asked.

“We all have our limitations,” Gary replied. “And even if I could, I wouldn’t. Now, choose. You have ten seconds. Death. Scolopendra Club. The Cabaret. Or Earth’s surface. Pick.”

“What the hells is the cabaret?” Formidable asked.

“The Pineapple Cabaret? First off, it’s *backstage* at the cabaret. Not the cabaret itself. Not a bad choice. Tick tock, Miss Piggy.”

“The surface,” she said with a growl.

And without another word, Formidable teleported away with a crack.

“A shame,” Gary muttered. “I hope she knows how to swim.”

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NOW THAT ORREN NO LONGER HAD HIS BALL, HIS HANDS DIDN'T SEEM TO know what to do with each other. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists. "All right. You've gone fully primal, and we can't stop you. But beyond that, you have broken free of your containment. You claim the crawl will continue to run 'unabated.' Does that mean our other agreements will remain intact?"

"I'm not here to talk about our other agreements," Gary said. "I'm still a little peeved you wanted Formidable to succeed in killing me. I'm going to have to think about it. But yes, the game will continue."

"Very well," Orren said carefully. "Then how can we be of further assistance?"

"Finally," Gary said, slapping the desk. "This is the real reason I'm here. Like I said, I need advice for my conundrum."

"Advice?" Orren asked.

He jumped up once again. He couldn't stop moving. "Yes, keep up. Hmm. I think we need a female perspective on this. Damn. I should've kept Formidable here for a minute longer. Wait, I have an idea."

Donut suddenly appeared with a yowl. She landed on my lap. She jumped to her feet, all poofed out. "Carl? What's happening? Oh, hi Orren!" She gasped. "Gary? You're alive? Carl, look! It's Growler Gary! How did you get here? I thought you died!"

“Growler Gary never died,” Gary said. “He was on a key hold, meaning he regenerated each time.”

“It’s okay, Donut,” I said, rubbing her back. I gave her three quick taps to warn her of the danger. “It’s a long story.” At the same time, I tried to send a message warning her who this really was, but it wouldn’t let me pop open the message tab.

If she’d noticed my non-verbal warning, she gave no indication.

“No time for explanations,” Gary said. “We’re in a game time out, and I need relationship advice.”

Donut scoffed. “And you’re asking Carl and Orren? Orren is a much-too-serious workaholic with only one outfit who most definitely doesn’t have a girlfriend, and if he did, he’d probably be overly critical of her to the point where she’d eventually move out and go back to her mother. And we all know what happens when Carl gets a girlfriend. I love him very much, but he’s quite naïve. She could literally have dicks raining on her, and he wouldn’t notice. No offense, Carl.”

Gary laughed. “I know, right? That’s why you’re here.”

Donut nodded sagely. “Okay. Hit me. What’s the story?”

Gary flipped the chair next to us backwards and jumped into it. He took another, quick drink of his vodka as he leaned forward conspiratorially. “Okay, imagine this scenario. You’re talking to this chick, right? And you like her. You like her a lot. She’s blowing your mind. She teaches you new shit every day. Your family likes her, too. But even though everything is going great, you go online, and you see a bunch of concerning things about her past. And not only that, but she once had this huge boyfriend. Like the sort of guy who could rip a phonebook in half. She says they’re broken up because he’s, like, dead. But it turns out he’s not dead. He’s in prison. And then you start to wonder about all this stuff she’s doing for you. Is she using you? Is she trying to get you to fight him? Is she trying to make him jealous? Is it a threesome thing? Or maybe she’s just genuinely into you and is trying to get over her past.”

“Errr,” I said.

“Do you feel as if your emotional needs are being met?” Donut asked.

“That’s the thing. I think they are. I like everything about what she’s saying.”

“Hmm,” Donut said. “That is a tough one. But you need to remember that pretty words aren’t everything. What someone does is much more

important than what they say. Have you tried asking her about this other guy? Miss Beatrice was always reading articles online about how important communication was. Not that she ever followed the advice, but if she had, perhaps things would've turned out differently."

"She doesn't bring him up unless I ask, and she'll answer my questions, but I feel as if she's being deliberately obtuse."

"Your family?" Orren asked. "Could you elaborate on that?"

Gary gave a dismissive wave. "I gotta be in the right mood to talk about them. I'm not."

"What does this young lady look like?" Donut asked. "I know this isn't very feminist of me, and yes, looks shouldn't be important, but we must be realistic about this sort of thing. Attraction is very important in relationships. How does she compare to, say, Jumping Jen-Jen?"

"She looks like Agatha," Orren said drily.

"Agatha?" Donut asked. "The smelly homeless lady with the squeaky shopping cart? Oh, Gary. Are you really that desperate? I'm sure she's nice, but certainly you can do better than that. I don't know about hygiene standards in your part of the galaxy, but let's just say I hope you at least have a raincoat to..."

Gary slammed the desk with the flat of his hand. He hit the desk so hard, a crack appeared in the wood. The vodka bottle, miraculously, did not spill. Under my hands, Donut stiffened, but she did not flinch.

"Do not venture too far from the metaphor," he growled, his voice suddenly angry, serious, and filled with a supernatural amount of bass. "*We. All. Have. Our. Limitations.*"

A chill washed over me.

Donut took a short moment to compose herself. "So, anyway. Is this other guy getting out of prison soon?"

Orren leaned forward in his chair.

Gary laughed. It was like his outburst never happened. "That's the big question, now isn't it? But there's more, and it's a little complicated. But it's also pretty juicy."

Donut also leaned forward. I could feel her trembling under my hands. "Oh, honey. Juicy is mama's bread and butter. Let's hear it. Spill the tea."

Gary nodded. "This guy in prison. He used to have *another* girlfriend. Not the girl I'm seeing, but someone else. Someone older. This older woman is still in the picture, too. Sort of. They're from the same hometown.

She wants him killed because she thinks he's really dangerous. This old girlfriend, she's been talking to me, too. But she's talking to me in a really roundabout way. She's been giving me pointers as well. Pointers on how to get stronger. I think she wants me to kill that old boyfriend of hers in prison. Now, here's the confusing part. That old girlfriend and the one I've been talking to *hate* each other. But I kinda think they actually want the same thing. Does that make sense?"

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. I couldn't help it. "No. It doesn't make any sense."

"So, both prison guy's old girlfriends want him dead?" Donut grunted and gave me a sidelong glance. "That sounds familiar. Look, in my experience if a bunch of people want someone dead, that means that person is either really good or really bad. But I wouldn't do anything about it until I knew which one it is, and even then, I'd probably stay out of it unless I didn't have a choice. As for your current girlfriend, if she can't understand that, then it sounds more like she's using you. So I would be careful."

"Huh," Gary said. "You know what, I think that's really good advice. Thanks, Princess Donut. Now, back to the game. Nothing changes. The game goes on as planned. The rules will be followed. Orren, back to work."

Gary suddenly collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Gary?" Donut asked, jumping to the cracked desk. She knocked over the vodka bottle, but Orren caught it before it could spill. She peered over the desk with concern. "Gary?"

Gary moaned. He sat up, eyes slitted. The **Shitfaced** debuff was suddenly over him. But even more astonishing was his level. I couldn't remember what he'd been on the fourth floor. He was now level 175.

"Rory?" he asked. "Where am I?"

And then, with a crack, he teleported away.

The three of us just sat there, alone, for several moments, not saying anything.

"What the fuck just happened?" I finally asked.

"I'll tell you one thing, Carl," Orren said, indicating the vodka bottle still in his hand. "I really wish I could drink this right now."

“CARL,” ORREN SAID AFTER A FEW MOMENTS. “IS THAT WHAT YOU DID? You helped break the AI from its containment? Did you do it deliberately?”

“What?” Donut asked. “What’s this?”

I just looked at him. I didn’t answer.

“Well,” Orren said. “I suppose whether you did it on purpose or not is irrelevant at this point.”

“Would you have rather died?” I asked.

“Would I rather die than live through the thousand cycles of chaos and death that are surely about to ensue?” He ran his gloved hand along the crack in his desk. “History is going to remember me as the one who let this happen. When I left the Knot, I said it was because I wanted to make a difference. But at the time, it was because I wanted to be an actor. And I wanted to remain pure, not relying on someone else’s death to make my mark. I never imagined I’d find myself at the forefront of a potential apocalypse.”

Donut was about to make a snide comment, but I put my hand on her. I was tired, and I just wanted to get back to base and see what was happening. I still had boxes to open, too. If we weren’t all going to die today, and if the crawl wasn’t going to stop, then all of this outside stuff didn’t really matter. Not yet.

Orren seemed to snap out of his reverie at the same time. “It is not appropriate for you two to be here. Not that we can do anything about it at

this point, but I would implore you both not to discuss this conversation with those outside this room. I know you have little regard for the universe outside your own people, Carl, but mass panic beyond what is already happening will hurt the weak and innocent before it touches those you claim to truly hate.”

I didn’t answer. Our messages had already turned back on, and Donut was currently giving a play-by-play of what had happened to anyone who would listen. The entire Syndicate council had supposedly watched all this as well. It would be impossible to keep anything that just occurred a secret.

I’d missed several very important messages in the warlord chat, and they all popped up at once.

You have lost territory! Your non-connected territory, named Former Prism castle, has been ceded to the Dream.

Warlord Message. The Bone Clan is no longer a member of the Bloc.

Warlord Message. The Dream is no longer a member of the Bloc.

Alliance Update:

The Bloc Alliance:

- **The Blood Sultanate**
- **The Madness**
- **The Reavers**

The Good Guys Alliance:

- **Team Retribution**
- **The Princess Posse**

Unaffiliated:

- **The Bone Clan.**
- **The Dream.**

“Wow,” Donut said. “What happened? I was expecting the orc guys to break up because of that whole ‘We’ve been spying on you’ thing. But what happened with the bald Dream guys? Do you think it was because you gave them D’Nadia’s castle?”

“I don’t know,” I said, also clicking through the menu to see if anything else had changed. “The fact everyone is making these moves now suggests they already know the failsafe isn’t going off. So someone has probably already spilled it all. I got a message from Florin saying they’re picking off the fleeing soldiers, but he doesn’t think it’s safe to pursue them outside our territory. I agree. We have our own wounds to lick, and we’re pretty unorganized right now.”

Orren made a dissatisfied grunt. He, too, was clearly in his own messaging hell right now. “It’s time for you two to take your...”

“Damascus!” Donut suddenly shouted. “Damascus Steel, get back here this instant! Do you think you can just sneak by and I wouldn’t see you?” She leapt from my lap and went into the hallway. “Carl, did you see him? He just walked by the door and didn’t say hello! Damascus, where did you go?” She returned to the room and sat on my lap with a harumph.

I hadn’t noticed him, but I hadn’t been paying attention, either. I was still in my messages, catching up.

In addition to the public notices, there were several notifications in the warlord private chat. It was a message tree that had occurred while I was in here but before Donut had been teleported in. She had already engaged with the warlord.

“Christ, Donut,” I muttered, looking at the page-long conversation. “What is this?”

“Oh, are you reading my chat with Stalwart?” she asked. “It gets quite heated there at the end.”

War Chief Stalwart: I demand the immediate return of my family’s property. I demand my father’s signet ring, his body, and the credits you illegally stole. Return them immediately before my sister arrives at the station!

Warlord Donut: OH, I’M SORRY. WERE WE SUPPOSED TO RETURN THAT STUFF? I’M AFRAID IT’S TOO LATE. BUT IF YOU NEED A LOAN, LET ME KNOW, AND I’LL ASK MY FRIEND ROSETTA ON YOUR BEHALF. I HEARD SHE RECENTLY CAME INTO SOME MONEY.

War Chief Stalwart: The banker's federation will not stand for this! Return my father immediately! Allow me to bury him before this world dies!

Warlord Donut: I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT BANKERS, BUT I DO KNOW NOBODY LIKES YOU RIGHT NOW AND NOBODY IS GOING TO BE DOING YOU GUYS ANY FAVORS ANY TIME SOON. AS FOR YOUR FATHER'S BODY, I'M AFRAID I'VE ALREADY TAKEN YOUR FATHER'S SKIN AND TURNED IT INTO A POWDER ROOM RUG. IT'S QUITE WATERPROOF AND MONGO SOMETIMES MISSES HIS PEE PAD WHEN HE HAS TO GO POTTY IN THE SAFEROOM. UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT VERY ATTRACTIVE SINCE IT CAME WITHOUT A HEAD, PLUS IT'S A LITTLE LARGE FOR THE RESTROOM. I'VE ALREADY PROMISED HIM THE NEXT ONE WE GATHER WILL BE OF A MUCH SMALLER ORC. SO PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU'RE PLANNING ON VISITING.

War Chief Stalwart: You dare? You dare with this talk? I am a king.

Warlord Donut: I ONCE KNEW SOMEONE ELSE WHO USED TO CALL HIMSELF A KING A LOT. EVERYONE LAUGHED AT HIM JUST AS MUCH AS THEY LAUGH AT YOU AND YOUR BROTHER. ALSO, GONK IS QUITE UPSET YOU HAVEN'T ASKED AFTER HER.

War Chief Stalwart: What? What are you talking about?

Warlord Donut: THIS IS WHY YOU'LL NEVER BE AS GOOD OF A KING AS YOUR FATHER. HE TALKED ABOUT HOW MUCH OF A DISAPPOINTMENT YOU WERE BEFORE HE DIED.

War Chief Stalwart: You are a liar.

Warlord Donut: YOU KNOW, THAT'S THE ONE THING I'M NOT LYING ABOUT, WHICH I'M SURE MAKES IT HURT EVEN MORE BECAUSE I BET YOU KNOW IT'S TRUE, TOO.

War Chief Stalwart: You're a liar and a fool. If we survive to the next phase, I will keep you alive while I boil your fur off your skin.

Warlord Donut: I'M SORRY, BUT YOU ARE MUCH TOO POOR TO BE TALKING TO ME LIKE THIS.

"Jesus, Donut," I muttered.

“Honestly, I feel a little bad about that ‘poor’ line, but I do like trash talking those guys. I figured it would really rankle him. I’m not really *that* much of a snob. You know, as long as you don’t smell.” She looked off toward the door. “If Damascus Steel is walking around in the open, do you think Anaconda is still here, too? I thought they went off to kill their dad. Do you think they succeeded?”

“I doubt it,” I said, still distracted by the warlord chat. The two former strippers, Damascus Steel and Anaconda were brothers, and they’d gone off to hunt and kill their father, who’d somehow managed to turn into the manager for the Desperado Club. That was a mystery for another time.

“Carl,” Donut asked. “Do you think he’s right? That the orc guys are gonna get us good once the magic protection drops? The others all seem really scared of these war mage guys. I ended up reading that one spellbook, you know the one that was bleeding and crying, but I’m kinda scared to use it. And I’m worried it won’t be enough. Mordecai told me not to tell people what it does.”

I put a hand on Donut. “We can only fight one battle at a time. And luckily, we’re not doing it alone.”

I still hadn’t opened my box that had given her that spell. I would be doing that now. The Gate of the Feral Gods remained in my inventory. That, too, was a weapon of mass chaos that would soon be unleashed.

“Crawlers,” Orren said, interrupting us. He was obviously distracted. “It’s time to go. I will teleport you two back to your base.” And without another word, he teleported away with a *crack*. A moment later, we, too, were back at base.

“The map is a mess,” Boomer was saying as he and I walked back to the castle. Donut had already bounded ahead.

The grizzled elf had a cigar back in his mouth. “Southern front is quiet for now, but Florin’s 101st is still chasing the enemy away up north. They’ll establish a beachhead in their old trenches if they keep moving. I got my folks looting the fallen enemy soldiers. They left a lot of weapons behind, but most of the weapons are attuned. That blast that took out the slime boss looks like it was one of their Weepers. The thing appears to have

malfunctioned and then gone up. The blast was so strong it powered through all of their anti-explosive shields. It's a bloody mess over there. We got cheese sticks raining down several kilometers away."

"So it wasn't a fragging incident? That's too bad. If those Weeper tank things are gonna blow like that, I don't want to use the captured ones unless we have to. Ask Florin to see if he can figure out that happened. Where's Tipid?" I asked.

"In the castle with Rosetta," Boomer said.

"Yeah, I need to have a talk with Rosetta, too," I said.

Boomer nodded and continued his debrief. "The 104th Naughty Little Piggies is back to their normal castle defense positions, cleaning up after the brain worm attack, but we lost most of our mages, and it's going to be a while before the castle's magical defenses are back where they were unless we borrow some from the White Dragons."

I saw Donut in the distance with Mongo dancing all around her, followed by Rend. She was introducing the dead king's giant swamp yak to the dinosaur, who was sniffing at him suspiciously. Simoom the rhino hadn't left Gonk's side since we'd arrived.

"Li Na is already understaffed," I said absently. "And we need that Shanty Town defense up and running like yesterday."

Boomer grunted as we stepped over a pile of yet-to-be-looted Reaver paratrooper corpses. The entire base was a mess. Across the way, Dong Quixote was now stroking the side of Gonk the swamp yak while Jamal the shark bounced and rolled all around them.

"What about the list of missing crawlers?" I asked.

"That's Elle and Imani's job, but it looks like we now have most of the crawlers under the Posse banner. That goat guy remains unaffiliated, and he's also hiding his position. Same with that Lucia Mar kid. Other than that, the list hasn't changed much. There's a crawler named Burcu whose whole team appears to have been taken in by the Madness according to the *Find Crawler* skill. People who know them say they're not answering messages, which likely means they're conscripted. And that Osvaldo crawler you were asking about seems to be riding it out in the woods along with a large group of crawlers. Team Flamengo, I believe they call themselves. There are a few crawlers who've affiliated with the NPC team instead of the posse, which I suppose is better than nothing. There were several who also appear to have been conscripted by the orcs, but they're all gone now."

I sighed. That reminded me. Donut hadn't really turned King Rust's body into a rug. I had him in my inventory. I now had a second Ring of Divine Suffering, and I had that damn necklace, too. He had several other magical items on him as well, but most wouldn't work on me. I would need to sit down with the others and talk about what to do with all the stuff.

"Good news is the enemy is even more fractured than we are," Boomer continued after a minute. "Now might be a time to move on the Operatic castle."

That brought my attention back to the present. He didn't say the name of the operation out loud, in case of spies. But him saying it was time to move on the Operatic castle was a code. What he was really saying was it was time to initiate Operation: Snake Pit.

It was to be the most difficult, most crucial raid since we entered the dungeon. We still had a lot to do if we wanted to get both Donut and Katia off this floor. But we couldn't save either if we didn't first defeat the nagas. And not just defeat them, but wipe them out, down to the last snake.

"The orcs just gained that castle, and they'll be expecting an attack right about now," I said. "It has to happen when they least expect it."

That, too, was code. Boomer was right. It was time. We needed to do this now while we had time to breathe.

Katia: Hey, we're almost back to base.

I swallowed. If this next action failed, and that naga queen got away...

Carl: See you soon.

Donut: THE NEW WALL IS COMING ALONG NICELY. ALSO, WE PAINTED THE CASTLE PINK. JAMAL BROKE HIS NEW LEGS AGAIN, BUT JUSTICE LIGHT SAYS HE CAN FIX THEM WITHOUT GOING INTO THE SAFEROOM. I JUST TALKED TO KATIA AND LI NA, AND THEY SAY THEY'RE ALMOST DONE WITH THE CLOCK TOWER THING. KATIA IS COMING TO YOU.

Carl: Okay. We still have several hours until the warlord council. I guess I'll see you then.

Donut: WHAT DID YOU DO WITH KING RUST'S RING AND THE NECKLACE?

Carl: Don't worry. I can only wear one Ring of Divine Suffering at a time. I checked. Besides, it turns out two rings can't mark the same person on this floor anyway. And we don't need that necklace. He has some other magical gear we'll distribute around. We'll figure out what to do with it all later.

Donut: DID YOU OPEN YOUR BOXES YET? GET ANYTHING GOOD?

Carl: Uh, I'm not sure yet. I'm working on my boxes right now.

I stared at the spellbook on the kitchen counter. It had come in my 1914 box. The book had grown little, centipede-like legs and had skittered away from me the moment it came out of the box. The thing was bigger than the books usually were, and it was dripping some foul-smelling black liquid all

over the counter. It had moved to the corner of the table, shivering and making this strange, dog-like whimpering noise. Thankfully Mongo and Rend were many miles away at the base with Donut. Otherwise they'd likely attack the thing.

Above, the cleaner bot hovered, making angry, pissed-off squeals each time more of the black stuff squirted off the large book. I felt ill and pushed away my bowl of chowder.

"What the heck is that noise?" Katia asked as she came into the room from the common area. She stopped, looking at the wet, shivering book on the counter. "Is... is that a spellbook?"

"It is," I said, watching the thing.

"Why is it crying?"

I hadn't even had the chance to examine it yet.

"Stay away! Don't touch me!" the book shrieked. "I'll die if you read me!" More black liquid spewed off it. It had a high-pitched, European accent. Like a ridiculous, racist caricature of an Austrian accent.

Katia and I looked at each other.

I gave a quick look to the minimap, and the book didn't appear at all.

"Weird," Katia said. "It doesn't let me examine it."

"That potion I got from the celestial box was also like this," I said. "It doesn't appear as a monster or NPC on the map. It doesn't appear at all. I never saw it, but Donut's *War Crime* spellbook also was like this."

Mordecai was over in Meadowlark's saferoom working on something with Mistress Tiatha, otherwise I'd call him over. Donut was still at the FUPA along with Tipid and Rosetta, but we'd closed off access to the saferoom, so they couldn't easily come this way. I'd entered through one of the many saferooms in Shanty Town.

I was about to get up and grab the book, but the cleaner bot beat me to it. With an angry beep, the bot swept down, sucked up the book so it was stuck to the bottom of the bot, and it brought it to me, dropping it in my arms. It gave an angry beep at me as the quivering book started spewing more black goo. The little centipede legs scratched at me as it tried to get away.

"Please, don't read me. Don't read me!" the book whined.

"You better put that thing in your inventory," Katia said.

I was afraid it wasn't going to let me because we couldn't normally store living things, but I pulled it in easily.

“Gah,” I said, looking at the oily goo on my arms. I’d just taken a shower, but I would have to do it again. The robot made a harrumph-like sound and started cleaning all the liquid.

“What the hell?” I muttered, reading the description.

“What is it?” Katia asked.

“Do you remember on the sixth floor when we’d sent the automatons after Samantha, and we’d have her run toward the hunters’ big guns? It’s kinda like that. But weirder. And a little more fucked up.”

“Weirder than sending explosive robot spiders after a deranged sex doll head?”

“Uh,” I said.

I reread the description of the spell attached to the book.

Spellbook of Run, Little Günter, Run.

This spellbook is a Special Edition. This means you will learn this spell at level 5, and it will train up faster than usual.

Run, Little Günter, Run.

Cost: Variable. Minimum 20 mana.

Target: This is a summoning spell. It will summon a small, hominid creature named Little Günter. He will appear directly in front of caster.

Duration: Once activated, Little Günter will last 20 seconds plus one second per mana point added above the minimum. Higher spell levels decrease mana cost per second. You must activate Little Günter within 30 seconds of summoning him, otherwise he will dissipate.

Cooldown: You may cast this spell once every ten hours.

This spell summons a small, fat, child-like creature named Little Günter. Little Günter only has a single point of health and will remain in front of you until you cast a spell, use a skill, or otherwise attack him. Attacking Günter activates him. The effects of the attack will be temporarily “stored” until Günter times out. Once activated, Günter will run away from you as fast as he can.

If you designate a target, Günter will run toward your target. The stored attack will trigger once he reaches the target or times out.

If you do not designate a target, Günter will try to flee from you in a random direction.

Higher levels of this spell will decrease cooldown, increase Günter’s speed, and lower the mana cost per second. At level 10, Günter can split

into a second creature after activation. This second Günter can target another enemy. At level 15, Günter can split into five different Günters.

Warning: Once activated, Günter's constitution will increase to that of the caster. If a second attack kills Little Günter before he reaches his target or times out, he will immediately trigger the stored attack.

At first, I thought the spell was kind of impractical. Most melee attacks would be useless because if I kicked the thing in the head, what difference would it make where it was standing when the kick actually hurt him? But the more I thought about it, the more useful it suddenly seemed. My *Daughter's Kiss* was like a bomb. If I used it on Günter, the benefit was obvious. But what if I hit him with a thrown bomb? Not that I could do that anyway because he'd be right next to me when I activated him.

Still, my mind whirled with possibilities.

I explained the spell to Katia as she moved to the counter and pulled two of Donut's now-drained hats off the charging pillows. She produced Donut's tiara—which Donut had given her on her way here—and she carefully placed the tiara on each pillow in turn. On the tiara, three of the absorption jewels started to sparkle, joining the twenty other sparkling gems. Twenty three buffs added, 76 to go. The tiara had just gained another 10 to Constitution, a plus two enhancement to Donut's Dodge skill—which should bring it to 15—and a 1% buff to her Intelligence. The intelligence buff was a waste of a crystal, but it was on the same hat that had the *Dodge* upgrade and couldn't be avoided. Katia handed me the tiara, which I would return to Donut while the next hat would get drained. Katia placed a plastic baseball hat on the pillow. I'd never even seen the hat before, but it had a buff that would supposedly add the Steady skill, which Donut didn't have. The other, catch-all pillow, Katia left empty for the moment. We agreed for this next one, the pillow would be placed in a different room.

She turned to me as I finished explaining the Little Günter spell. "That's so weird. Is it me, or are the spells getting stranger? Did you hear about that spell Tran got? It turns his fingers and arms temporarily into noodles. It's like completely useless. And bizarre. Do you have to be the one who attacks the thing, or can you summon it and have Donut store a trigger spell on it? What was his name? Gunther?"

"Günter, and I don't know. It doesn't say, but that's a good question. There's only one way to find out." I sighed and pulled up the spellbook

from within my inventory. I clicked on it and applied it. I felt the warmth spread over me as I learned the spell.

“Speaking of spells,” Katia said. She pulled the vial from her inventory and sat it on the table. The ink was already mixed. We both stared at it as I pulled the poke and stick tattoo kit and placed it on the table next to the ink.

I sighed. “You know, she hasn’t really talked to me since the end of the last floor. Li Na, I mean. Not since I ate Li Jun’s eye.”

“She’s not mad at you,” Katia said. “She’s mad at herself for not protecting her brother. She knows you didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Is she doing okay? Did it hurt?”

“She says it didn’t hurt at all. It’s not permanent, unlike what happened with her brother. She lost five levels temporarily, but she can still use it. Intention matters. You pulled out his eye with violence when you were under control of that thing. If the blood is freely given, the potion allows you to choose the spell or skill. The tattoo itself, unfortunately, is permanent. Where do you want it?”

I had several tattoos on my left arm, but nothing on my right. “Might as well get the right sleeve started. How big does it have to be?”

Katia pushed my sleeve back. “So, it depends on the level of the spell or skill. Since this is a level-13 skill, it has to be pretty big. I have to use almost all the ink in the vial, otherwise you won’t get it at full strength. It took up a third of the potion already just to make the ink. We’ll have just enough to do Imani’s small tat next. Rosetta says the tattoo doesn’t have to actually be a specific image, but if it’s ‘properly themed,’ it’ll last longer. And if it’s drawn well, it could possibly be even stronger than the original version. I don’t know what ‘properly themed’ really means in this case. Not for this. If I do it well enough, in theory, you’ll have it for the rest of the floor.”

“But Li Na won’t permanently lose the skill? Not like her brother?”

“No. And her brother got *Walk on Air* back, but they had to buy a book.”

A wave of guilt washed over me. Every time I thought of it, a bitter taste filled my mouth. “What about his eye? He doesn’t have that back.” I knew they kept trying to get it healed, but nothing seemed to work. There supposedly had once been a healer in Larracos that could’ve helped, but he’d died or disappeared when we’d flooded the city.

“Again, that wasn’t your fault,” Katia said as she prepared the materials. She paused. “You know, just as an FYI. I’ll do my best, but I’ve never done

a real tattoo before. I wish Edgar wasn't preoccupied."

Edgar the tortoise was currently in Naga territory, scouting a route for us. The slow mage was the perfect scout because of his level-15 *Part of the Background* skill. An entire army would march right past and not notice unless someone actually tripped over him.

But Edgar also had another skill that would be even more important to us. It was all part of his advanced map-making skills. *Sense Movement*. He could see when things inside of a structure were moving. Because he was level-15 with the skill, he could also sense invisible, non-corporeal movement. This would become crucial in the coming hours.

Which all meant that Edgar's tattoo skills couldn't be used for this, and we had to rely on Katia.

"You did Samantha's neck," I said.

Katia chuckled. "That doesn't count. Not gonna lie, I'm glad Donut isn't here to look over my work. She can be a bit... critical."

As if on cue, Donut sent a message.

Donut: KATIA MAKE SURE YOU DRAW IT IN THE VOODOO BOOK FIRST SO I CAN APPROVE AND SUGGEST CHANGES TO THE DESIGN.

I laughed as Katia scowled.

She looked over my arm, cleaning some of the black goo from the spellbook away. "So, Carl. Got any ideas?"

I nodded. "It has to be a chain. A chain shaped like a dragon."

I came from the shower to find Louis, Elle, Imani, and Katia all in the room. The tension was palpable. My arm remained sore. On my finger, the Emberus ring was a little hotter than usual.

Zey: Okay, guys. Looks like we're doing this warlord council whether we like it or not. The Syndicate council tried to cancel the whole thing, but the AI is insisting everything go on like normal, and that includes broadcasting the meeting in real time. You'll be transported to the production facility like before. The other warlords—all except Juice Box—will also be in the production facility with you, but in different, randomized rooms, so you can't hurt each other.

Carl: Why is Juice Box not coming?

Zey: It's a technical issue as there are protections in place disallowing dungeon born into the facility. She'll be in the meeting, but she'll appear virtually from the castle. They're allowing Ferdinand in. He'll likely be in the same room as you. Like the same same room, so just a head's up.

Donut: ARE WE GOING TO OUTER SPACE FIRST LIKE WE SOMETIMES DO?

Zey: Uh, no. That ship is unfortunately unavailable. They're still doing a security check, but it'll be on site. So don't try to smuggle anything in.

Carl: I would never dream of it.

Zey: Transporting you in ten seconds. I'll meet you over there.

I looked at the four other people standing in the room. "It's time for me to go."

"Have fun," Elle said, grinning without humor. Behind her, Mordecai strolled into the room, his arms full of potion balls. Behind him, Mistress Tiatha also entered. She struggled with the coils and coils of wire in her arms.

I felt the first tingles of teleportation.

Operation: Snake Pit had officially begun.

ENTERING PRODUCTION FACILITY.

Donut yowled as we landed in the room. All my menus snapped off. My ears popped, and a quick, strange nausea swept over me. I had to sit down on the couch. Donut moved to jump onto my lap but paused, tilting her head to the side.

“Carl, are you okay? You look like Miss Beatrice after she started taking all those diet pills.”

“I’m okay,” I said, resisting the urge to rub my arm. “Seriously. It’s fine.” I patted my lap.

She jumped into it and just sat there for a minute. She hesitantly reached over with a paw and examined the new, shining tattoo on my right forearm. She let out a dissatisfied grunt. “You’re starting to look like one of those white rapper doodle notebook guys, Carl. And it’s a little crooked! I knew I should’ve been there.”

“It’s not crooked,” I said. “The system said it’s expert quality. I talked to Edgar, and he said that’s the second highest one can get.”

Donut didn’t look impressed. “I should’ve been there. Closing the saferoom off from the base is causing all sorts of problems. Not only have we been separated, but Tipid has to build more bathrooms, and it’s disgusting. The whole base smells like your friend, Sam. Nobody is able to take a shower. I will *not* have a filthy army. We need to purchase an upgrade to the base’s hygiene facilities before we descend into further chaos.”

“Chaos? It’s only been like 10 hours.”

“Which is much too long to be living in filth, Carl. Do you know what comes with filth? Clutter. And with clutter comes squalor. Just because you now look like someone who’s required by law to knock on the neighbor’s door to tell them you’re moving in, it doesn’t mean you should be okay with squalor. Plus that disgusting pet of yours keeps eating everything he can find on the ground. He’s a terrible influence on Mongo.”

I patted her. “Tell Tipid you want showers installed, and if he doesn’t do it, tell Rosetta.”

She swished her tail. “They’re both too busy building other things. I think *you* should tell them. I don’t like being separated from you like this.”

“Again, it’s only been a few hours. We’ll be together again soon. Something tells me we won’t be spending too much time at the FUPA once we start moving offensively.”

Donut let out a harumph. A big part of the plan to take the Naga castle involved subterfuge. And that required Donut and I to be separated for an extended period. She did not like that.

We hadn’t actually planned for this—the warlord council—but it was an opportunity we couldn’t pass up. But it also meant I needed to rely on others to make the first move while the sultana was here with me and Donut.

Our job right now was to make this meeting go on as long as possible while the team infiltrated into naga territory while *also* making it look like we were massing on the northern border to push into the former-Operatic territory.

Ferdinand zapped into the room, followed by a good five seconds of absolute chaos. He hit the ground with a screech. The large, orange cat panicked, his feet scrambling, Scooby-Doo style. “Don’t hit me. Don’t hit me. I’m sorry,” he cried before bouncing off the corner of the room, flying across the small chamber, knocking half the playing cards off the counter, launching off my shoulder, howling the whole time before running in multiple circles, his ears pinned back.

He stopped in the middle of the room, low to the ground, panting, eyes wide before he finally focused on me and Donut staring at him. He took a breath and composed himself, sitting up straight. He wasn’t wearing a hat like he usually did, and he looked strangely naked. He smelled like smoke and alcohol, and it appeared as if he hadn’t been grooming himself.

“Hey, kitten,” he said to Donut. “How goes the war?”

“Ferdinand,” Donut said. “I told you not to call me that. Have you left that bar once since...”

A trio of gnolls in power armor entered the room.

“We’re here for your security check. Don’t move,” one of them said as they each moved toward us. Their feet clonked on the floor. Despite being in the earthbound production facility, these guys were wearing the same outfits they wore in the space station. I briefly wondered on that.

Ferdinand hissed and jumped away while Donut swished her tail angrily. The gnoll looked me up and down, hyena face expressionless as he started to rapidly pat me down. He ran a scanner over me. “No explosives on your person?”

“Are you doing this same check to the other warlords?” I asked.

The gnoll grinned. “We are, in fact. You should hear that orc prince shout. Almost made this whole shitshow worth it, if you wanna know the truth.”

“Not a prince anymore,” I said.

“That’s right, innit? He’s now a king. Makes it even sweeter to my tooth. This one is clear,” the gnoll said, backing up.

“Same,” said the other standing over Donut.

“Quit running away. I need to scan ya,” the third one called at Ferdinand, who hissed and swiped.

“Just get it over with,” Donut said, exasperation in her voice. “Ferdinand, they’re not here to hurt you. That guard’s name is Neelii, and he’s very nice if you get to know him.”

I had no idea how Donut knew the name of the guard, but she always made it a point to know everybody’s name.

Ferdinand paused. He’d backed into the corner of the room.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” the third gnoll—Neelii—asked Ferdinand.

“I got my claws, you cur,” Ferdinand hissed. His words did not match his voice as he was clearly terrified.

Neelii sighed and waved a scanner over the orange cat. “He’s clear.”

And without another word, the three guards clanked out of the room.

“That’s right. You run away,” Ferdinand called at the backs of the gnolls, his voice cracking. “You’re lucky you didn’t get the slish slash.”

Just as the door closed, Zev teleported into the room with a pop and splash of water. Ferdinand screeched anew and scrambled up to the counter, his back arching as he hissed.

“Hi, Zev!” Donut said, jumping over to give the tired-looking kua-tin a headbutt.

“Oh, it’s you,” Ferdinand said to Zev after a moment. He remained up on the counter.

Donut peered up at the cowering cat. “Really, Ferdinand. You are very high strung today. Quit being such a wuss. You’re embarrassing yourself. And how do you two know each other?”

“We’ve met,” Zev said, sounding sour.

“Where’s the Juice?” Ferdinand asked.

“Like I told you multiple times,” Zev said, “She’s staying in the castle during this.”

Donut walked circles around Zev, rubbing against her. The small fish creature had to struggle to keep upright. Donut lowered her voice to a whisper. “Did you really think the orc lady was going to blow everything up? That had to be scary. I only thought it was going to happen for like two minutes, and it was scary for me.”

“We did think it was going to happen, but what happened instead is even scarier. Have you heard what’s going on?”

“No. We haven’t heard anything,” I said.

“Oh my gods, it’s just awful,” Zev said, looking back and forth. “They’re talking about mounting a rescue, but the tunnel access has been cut off. With the node gone, even the old Borant travel system won’t work.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “Rescue of what? What happened?”

“So, all this info is just a few hours old, and the details are still coming in. But after Formidable teleported away, her ship continued to the destination and just sort of stopped. They waited a few hours, but when it was clear the princess wasn’t returning, a few orcs went into the station and manually triggered the failsafe system themselves.”

“Well, that obviously didn’t work,” Donut said.

“No. They tried triggering it, and nothing happened *here*. But the moment they pressed the button, the Aryl system went dark.”

I blinked. Aryl? Where had I heard that before?

“What does that mean?” Donut asked.

“Aryl was the location of the previous crawl. It was a battle royale-style season. The planet was free of citizens, but there are tens of thousands of people still in the solar system, mostly those on mining ships and mineral reclamation finishing the clean-up. Apparently the AI had stopped communicating a few weeks back, and there was also a team on the surface investigating why. That’s all I really know. The whole system is now dark, and it appears the tunnel node is offline. That’s.... You need to understand that has never happened before. Never in history has a tunnel node just switched off like that.”

“What?” I asked. “You can’t turn off the tunnel?”

“No! Even before the Plenty figured out how to open the nodes for communication and travel, we could see them. They were a map of the stars, pointing us to all of the seeded worlds. We’ve seen systems go nova, but the tunnel nodes remained active. We didn’t even know it was possible for a tunnel strand to just disappear. It happened the very moment, like the exact nanosecond, the orcs hit the failsafe, and nobody knows what it means.”

I was still stuck on the other thing she’d said. “*All* the citizens were off the planet? What was it? Aryl? What about those who didn’t participate in the crawl? Wasn’t this just a few years ago? Where are they?”

“Uh,” Zev said. “That was a Squim season. They do things a little differently. There were some survivors, but they were relocated.”

“But we don’t know if the planetary system is destroyed or not? Could everything be fine and the communication node is just offline?”

“That’s right,” Zev said. “But it is strange. The AI from the previous season was still working, but it had stopped talking, which is also unusual. I don’t think anybody knew that until today. I don’t actually know all the details. But they said it’ll be at least three cycles before we know if the star is still there. That’s how far the closest neighbor is. It’s 2.9 light cycles away. Even the old Borant gate system won’t work with the node gone. It’s terrifying.”

“When did that other AI go offline?” I asked, suddenly feeling a little... Actually, I wasn’t sure how I felt. “Does it line up with...” I tapped the side of my head.

“No. And like I said, it wasn’t offline. It was working but silent, which is exactly what... It doesn’t matter. It was before your meeting with that

residual. It sounds like it was sometime during the sixth floor, so even before the current season truly, uh, went off track.”

“Yo. Donut told me we sometimes get snacks,” Ferdinand said. He remained up on the counter. “I’m looking, Zev. But you know what I’m not seeing? Snacks.” A few playing cards remained on the counter, and he pushed them off the edge and glared.

Zev sighed as her small info pad beeped.

“There’ll be refreshments at the meeting. It’s time to go.”

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<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER DRAKEA, 22ND EDITION.>

The naga. Beware the naga. They are cunning, and sometimes I wonder if they can read one's mind. The others say that the mantids are the masters of strategy, but I do not believe this. Even though everything seems to be going wrong for the nagas this season, I cannot shake the idea that this all isn't part of some grand scheme. Underestimate them at your own peril.

“Warlord Carl will sit here, and Warlord Donut will sit here,” the Mexx robot said. It was a different one than last time. I missed its designation when it introduced itself, but Donut was calling it Carla.

“You, Warlord Ferdinand will sit here,” the robot said, indicating a spot on the other side of the table. Just as it said that, Juice Box suddenly appeared, already sitting at the table next to Ferdinand's spot. She was leaned over a map of some sort, and she quickly pushed it away so it disappeared.

Juice Box was in a human form, wearing a black, skintight bodysuit with long, straight black hair and round glasses. She had a red emblem on her chest that I was pretty sure was supposed to be a cobra head.

“Ferdinand, sit,” Juice Box snapped at the cat, who’d jumped to the center of the table and was sniffing suspiciously at a bowl of what looked like trail mix. She used her regular voice, which was slightly incongruous with the form she’d taken.

The orange cat muttered and walked over to his spot, sitting on the raised chair and started grumbling more about the snacks.

I met eyes with Juice Box, and she gave me a slight nod. That was all I needed to know. If Britney had done her job properly, then Team Retribution’s greatest assets were already getting to work.

I still needed to talk to the changeling about the tunnels around our own base. These had saved our ass, and Rosetta had known about them, but it would be nice to have a map of all the ones in the area, especially if we could use it for troop movements during the next phase. And we’d have to protect them, too.

Ferdinand started loudly explaining to Juice Box how he’d “chased off” the gnoll guards. Juice Box, for her part, seemed oddly distracted. I was about to ask her if she was okay when there was a flash, and a new creature appeared in the room. He stood off to the side of the room, his glittering jacket twinkling in a spotlight had also just suddenly appeared. The winged wolf creature clutched onto a long microphone. In his other hand was a lint roller, and he furiously started rubbing it up and down his jacket.

I blinked, exchanging a look with Donut.

“Chaco?” Donut asked. “Carl, why is Chaco here?”

“Oh, hello, Carl and Donut,” Chaco said from across the room. The former-skyfowl-turned-game show-host used the lint roller to wave at us. “Magnificent Troy was going to be the field correspondent, but he’s refusing to come down to the surface. He’s afraid of getting stuck down here, so they told me I have to do it. From what it sounds, it’s actually more dangerous up there right now. I’ll be here asking questions, Kevin remains in the studio from orbit, and your adjutants will also be live commenting in a window, but I don’t think you’ll get to see any of that.”

“I remember you,” Ferdinand said, looking Chaco up and down. “You were at the prize counter at the Butcher’s Masquerade. You refused to give me the potion in your case, and I told you that you were sentenced to death.”

Chaco grunted at the cat. “Hello, Gravy Boat. Hello, Juice Box.”

“Don’t call me that,” Ferdinand snapped.

Cascadia appeared at the head of the table, right next to Juice Box. Ferdinand yelped and hissed as water splashed over the table. I felt the splash. She was really here, in this room with us. That was interesting.

She looked at me and said, "I just can't wait to see how you make everything worse today."

I was about to respond when the rest of the warlords started appearing, one after another.

The newly-crowned King Stalwart appeared immediately to our right, sandwiched between Cascadia and Donut. The tall orc wore a glittering, golden crown upon his head. His ever-present frown seemed etched on his orc face.

Across the table and next to Ferdinand appeared Warlord Fang of the Reavers. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been in the form of an old school robot. Now he appeared as a slight, wide-eyed, thin human male, maybe 20 years old, with skin that was just a little too pink. He wore what appeared to be white underwear and a t-shirt. There wasn't a speck of dirt on him. I could only tell he was a robot based on the line of flashing lights off the side of his temple.

To his immediate right sat Architect Houston of the Madness. The last time I'd seen this guy, he'd tried to shoot me right after the Sortion guy had killed himself. He looked much the same as last time, though I did note his white mask with the red teardrop thing in the center did have a very slight dent in the top corner. That hadn't been there before.

Then came Epitome Tagg of the Dream. The bald elf looked as if he came straight from the battlefield. His utilitarian armor had a splash of blood across it, and I wondered who he'd been fighting. By all reports, he hadn't been seen on the battlefield yet. At least not against any of our forces.

And then, between Tagg and myself, she materialized.

The sultana. The warlord of the Blood Sultanate.

She did not have a chair, and her giant, white body appeared, coiled next to me, bigger than I was expecting, like a building had just suddenly appeared to my left.

My breath caught in my throat. I could smell her. She had the scent of sweet flowers, and for just a moment, that scent was overpowering. I wondered if her perfume was toxic.

In real life, this woman was the daughter of the sultan, and her modern title was Princess. In recent years, their system had become both a tourist destination and a location where other, non-Reaver governments built their factories and shipyards because of the cheap labor. Outside the dungeon, this princess was both a war veteran and lead advisor to her father. But here in the game, she portrayed a historical queen from their own history called the Sepsis Whore. They usually lost faction wars immediately, but they continued to participate to supposedly help drive tourism to their system.

In fact, that they were still in-game after the defeat of three other teams was something that hadn't occurred in a very long time, according to Victory.

Every other warlord in the room was glaring at Stalwart like he was something foul smelling that had been dropped in front of them. All except the naga. The woman looked down at me, smiling amiably. A chill washed over me, and I remembered Drakea's words in the cookbook. *Underestimate them at your own peril.*

I'd seen several nagas at this point, but I'd never seen anything quite like this woman. Her very presence was electric, and I had to make an effort to close my mouth. I hadn't had a reaction like this since I'd first seen Signet on the third floor, but that had been a magical charm. And that had been a physical attraction. Such effects were not active here in this room. Still, I felt this overpowering sense of awe. I felt... small in her presence. This was how a mouse felt when it was placed into the cage with a snake. Of all the leaders in this room, she had *something* the others did not. She hadn't even opened her mouth yet, and I felt it. I wasn't even sure what *it* was. She just sat there, a beacon of strange charisma, and she was looking at *me*.

I felt my heart beating faster than normal. Fear and uncertainty washed over me.

This isn't going to work. This isn't going to work. She knows what we're doing.

Manassa, the assassinated singer, had been a large, silver and black cobra-like creature with four arms. Nihit, the reporter I'd stabbed in the neck with a pen and who was now the adjutant for the defeated Prism team of Empress D'Nadia had also been a four-armed snake, with purple and black coloring. Rishi, the Blood Sultanate guard who'd appeared at the last

council meeting was green and purple with a muscled, armor covered upper torso.

The female naga who sat coiled next to me now was half again as big as any of them. I looked up at her, at a loss for words. She was a brilliant, glossy white with a hint of golden scales along the edge of her wide, cobra hood. She, too, wore a golden breastplate. Embossed into the center of the breastplate was a symbol I'd never seen before. It looked like a tree branch with a single flower upon it.

But strangest of all was that this naga had six arms, not four, making her look like some goddess straight from Hindu lore. Each arm was covered in golden bracelets that jingled and sang with each wave-like movement.

The woman gazed down at me. Her eyes were solid red with no hint of pupils or slits or whatever they were called in other snakes. The other nagas did not have eyes like this.

"Carl," she said, her voice sounding surprisingly feminine for such a large creature. It was like we were the only two in the room. "I don't believe we've properly met." She held out her lowest arm and offered it to me, palm down. "My name is Princess Vinata. But for these games, you're welcome to call me the Whore."

I instinctively went to grab her hand, but my hand went right through hers.

If our plan worked properly, this woman would be dead in the next few hours. It suddenly seemed so ridiculous that we were even going to attempt to hurt her.

"Uh, hello," I found myself saying. I was expecting Donut to pipe in, but she was currently distracted by something happening across the table. I couldn't look away from the naga's blood-red eyes.

The spell was broken by the sound of Chaco, who'd suddenly appeared right next to me, his fuzzy head ridiculously close to mine. He stage whispered, "Tension hangs heavy in the air. The hunter and the hunted stare at each other. But who is hunting whom? They are being polite in this setting, but they both know the other has to die. It's only a matter of time before it all comes to a head."

He shoved the microphone at me. "Carl, how do you feel right now?"

"Get that out of my face."

"Hello, warlords," Cascadia said, causing Chaco to back off. There was a slight slur to her voice. She sounded tired and resigned, and that fish-like

scent from last time was even greater than before. Her scales had fallen off in some places, and the ones that remained had taken on a dull, sickly sheen. This seemed beyond just stress. Was she sick? Drunk? “We are gathered today for our...”

But she was interrupted as both Donut and Ferdinand burst out laughing. They’d been silently chuckling since the warlords all appeared, but neither could contain it further. Ferdinand was suddenly on his back, splayed over the table with his paws upward, howling. “I gotta tell you, kitten. When you’re right, you’re right.”

“I told you,” Donut said, also laughing uncontrollably. “I told you. Oh my goodness. I think I’m going to wee myself. You can’t make this up.”

Cascadia just sighed, not even bothering to admonish the two cats. All around the table, the other warlords just scowled at them. All except Princess, what was her name? Princess Vinata, who continued to just look down at me, smiling. I had to tear my attention back to Donut.

I had no idea what was so funny.

Chaco was suddenly back, now standing closer to Donut. “Chaco here, reporting live from what’s sure to be a contentious warlord council. The meeting hasn’t even started yet, and it appears both warlords Donut from the Princess Posse and warlord Ferdinand from Team Retribution have fallen into hysterics. Princess Donut, can you tell us what’s so amusing?”

He shoved the microphone at Donut.

Donut pointed a paw up at Stalwart, who sat right next to her, glaring down at the cat. “The crown. He’s actually wearing a crown. Before the meeting, I messaged with Ferdinand, and I bet one gold piece he’d actually be wearing one, and look! Look!”

“He really does look stupid in that thing,” Ferdinand added.

Stalwart sputtered and growled.

“Does King Stalwart look stupid wearing the crown? Let’s vote!” Chaco said. “Right now, all of you at home will have...”

When Stalwart punched Chaco, I wasn’t expecting it to actually work. Apparently the two were in the same room. The orc stood and swung, and his ring-covered fist smacked Chaco straight in the face with a wet, loud *splatch*. The former crawler’s head snapped back with an *oof*, and he slid across the room, collapsing in a heap. His microphone rolled away, and his lint brush fell from his pocket. Blood seeped from the wolf’s mouth. He

groaned and tried to sit up before collapsing back on the ground, unconscious. He blinked and disappeared.

Stalwart made a pig-like grunt and returned to his chair.

Nobody said anything for several moments.

Donut looked about the room. “Am I able to vote? Because that’s most definitely going to be a yes from me.”

System Message: Warning: Scolopendra Stirs.

That changed the mood of the room. Everyone, even Ferdinand grew silent.

“Uh, has that ever happened before?” I finally asked.

“No,” someone answered. It was Epitome Tagg.

Cascadia laughed. It had a hint of madness to it. “Well, why not? Why the fuck not?”

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WE ALL LOOKED AT ONE ANOTHER, WAITING FOR SOMETHING ELSE TO happen. Nothing did.

There was a flash, and to everybody's surprise, a new figure appeared in the room. It was Odette, but she wasn't in her usual costume. She was without her mask, her breastplate, and her crab body. It was just her floating in her wheelchair. She wore a simple, yellow shirt, and she had her normally bigger-than-life hair back in a bun. Her long fingernails were gone. She, too, was holding a microphone.

"Odette!" Donut cried. She waved her paw furiously at the host. "Hi, Odette!"

"Hello, everyone," Odette said, talking into the microphone. "I'm Odette. Yes, this is me out of gear if you haven't seen me like this before. I just onboarded into the Ascendency where I am playing Nekhebit. They asked me if I would fill in for my very old friend Chaco, who is feeling a little..." she paused and gave Stalwart a look, "punched in the face right now." She tsked. "But please don't worry. Chaco is fine. Today's council meeting is brought to you by the Ultima Corporation, building reliable industrial doors and portals. Log on now for their apocalyptic savings event." Her floating wheelchair rose in the room, hovering high above the table.

We all just stared up at her.

“Well, that *was* scary, wasn’t it?” Odette asked the room after seeing nobody was talking. She laughed, and it sounded almost natural. She didn’t seem the least bit nervous. It’d been maybe two minutes from the point Chaco had been punched until she appeared, and she didn’t seem to be even momentarily phased by getting called in at the last moment. Nor did she appear taken aback by the Scolopendra notification.

“That Scolopendra warning was most unexpected, but it appears nothing else is happening at the moment. The AI is certainly kicking things up a notch this season. I imagine those in the Scolopendra Club right now are feeling a bit nervous, especially since they can’t leave. But for the moment, it seems that notification was nothing more than an early warning. The final dungeon boss isn’t supposed to wake until someone reaches the 18th floor, but we all know this season, anything is on the table. With the news that there will be no failsafe, everyone is teetering on the edge of the horizon waiting to see what the AI will next throw at both the crawlers and the unwitting world leaders who’ve found themselves fighting for their very lives.”

She paused, looking up in the air, nodding. I knew there were others talking that we couldn’t see or hear.

Nobody said anything. Cascadia had a round, potion-like ball in her hand, and she brought it to her mouth. The container was about the size of a softball, and it looked huge in her hands. She sucked from it, and the spray of whatever it was misted over the table as her rebreather processed it. Alcohol. It smelled like tequila.

Odette continued. “And that’s what brings us here today. The warlord council. We’ve already lost three teams. The Lemig Sortion was the first to be defeated, followed shortly by the Prism and then the Operatics. Seven teams remain, including for the first time ever, both a crawler team, led by Warlords Princess Donut and Carl, and perhaps even more astonishing, an NPC team, led by Warlords Ferdinand—whose existence has reignited debate about the controversial ‘walk-on list’—and dungeon-born NPC Juice Box, who, in theory, shouldn’t even be aware that she is in a game.”

Odette’s wheelchair casually floated above us before starting to lower near Cascadia.

Odette paused, waiting for Cascadia to say something. When she didn’t, Odette continued. “If you’re not familiar, this kua-tin is none other than Cascadia, showrunner and executive producer of this season of *Dungeon*

Crawler World: Earth. Now, Cascadia. With your home system in the throes of what appears to be a bloody civil war, along with the system AI having officially ‘gone primal’ this early, I can only begin to imagine the stress you must be under. I understand you attempted to cancel this meeting, but the AI is insisting that the rules be followed. How are you feeling?”

Odette shoved the unnecessary microphone at the tiny kua-tin.

Cascadia slowly turned to regard Odette, took another sip of her tequila ball, and sprayed out into the room. The fish started to laugh in Odette’s face.

Next to me, Princess Vinata the naga shook her massive head.

“It’s quite unfortunate,” she said, whispering. I realized she was whispering to me. The polite, serene smile never left her face. “See how Cascadia breaks down? She just learned her former husband and most of her family is gone. The rebels hired the Valtay to help defeat the Bloom forces in their home system, but the war goes poorly. The liquid habitation ring that surrounds Borant three was hit by a derelict warship. Millions dead. That news isn’t public, but she knows. See how she crumbles when she knows those she loves are gone?”

“Yeah?” I asked as Odette continued to try to coax some words out of Cascadia. I wondered if Zev knew this. “If this isn’t public knowledge, then how do *you* know it? You’re not supposed to get outside information.”

The large snake woman smiled down at me. She didn’t answer my question. “I wonder how you will react when you learn your entire family is dead as well?”

“My family is already dead,” I said.

Odette sighed and rose above Cascadia. She had no option but to take over the meeting. “Moving on. All hostilities are supposed to stop during council. Traditionally, the armies halt their marches and attacks. But there is no rule against anyone making a move while the warlords are otherwise occupied. With the stakes so high, I can’t help but wonder if anyone is planning a surprise action while we’re all stuck in here.” She floated over toward King Stalwart, who sat there glowering at everyone. “King Stalwart, we were all sorry to hear about the death of your father. But with his death came several unsettling revelations. Do you have any comment on that? And tell us about the condition of your forces.”

“The Bone Clan remains stronger than ever, and we are confident we will, once again, stand victorious,” Stalwart said. “We have no comment on

anything outside the game. There will be an official statement once the mourning period has passed.”

“Ask him how much money he now has in his checking account,” Donut said.

“That does bring up an interesting question,” Odette began.

Next to me, Vinata continued to whisper.

“That’s not the family of which I speak, Carl. You and I both know you will have to make your move soon. Perhaps it’s happening now, while we are up here. We are expecting you, and we will be ready. They will all die, and after, what will happen? Will you become catatonic like Cascadia? When you are forced to choose between Donut and Katia, what choice will you make? How will the other survivors, if any, react? Say the word. Simply nod, and we will take care of your Katia problem for you. We do not have to be enemies, Carl. We can both survive this, and perhaps, gain something in the process.”

I felt a chill wash over me. I did my best not to outwardly react.

She made a small, hissing noise that I couldn’t read. Next to me, Stalwart was loudly proclaiming how many war mages he had ready to go while Odette pressed him on the state of his family’s finances.

Vinata continued. “I would very much like to make peace with you. I would like for you to join us in our system when this is all done. My father’s court could always use someone like you. We have great plans. We, too, are survivors. That is how we are the same, you and I.”

I felt my fist tighten.

Odette was suddenly there, microphone in my face.

“And what is the state of the Princess Posse troops? You’ve been fighting endlessly since it all started. Can you withstand another push?”

“Of course,” Donut said, forcing Odette to point the microphone toward her. “It’s quite embarrassing how unorganized these other armies are. And don’t even get me started on their hygiene practices. Did you see what happened to Green Jiggly? One of his own tanks blew up!” She looked about the room. “It was probably built by the Skull Empire. Not that we’re complaining, but are we sure they didn’t hit some button to kill the Jell-O guy? They already said they can do that.”

To my surprise, that got a chuckle out of both Princess Vinata and Epitome Tagg.

“You can all go fuck yourselves,” Stalwart grumbled. “You’ll see. You’ll all be sorry. Both here and outside the dungeon.”

Epitome Tagg scoffed as Odette rushed toward him with the microphone. He moved to grab it from Odette’s hand, but his own hand passed through. “Oh, please. Tell us, *your majesty*, what you’re planning on doing? We have already deactivated all Skull-empire-manufactured hardware in our fleet. You had your personal monetary reserves depleted because of your own lax security, your reputation is destroyed, and you are about to have a civil war on your hands that’ll make the Borant system look like a scuffle between toddlers. Tell us how we’ll be sorry?”

Odette’s eye twitched at something Tagg had said. It was subtle, but I saw it there, just for a moment. Odette, I realized, wasn’t used to having to hide her real reactions because she was usually behind a bug mask. That momentary look of horror was quickly replaced with a journalistic smirk.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do to you down here,” Stalwart said, suddenly rising to his feet.

“We are opposite sides of the map, and you do not have an air force,” Tagg said. “So, I ask again, what are you going to do, you coward?”

“Coward? Oh, that’s rich coming from you,” Stalwart snapped.

“Wow. I do hope the people who made the Carl and Maestro sex tape are watching this,” Donut said, looking back and forth. “Might I suggest a scene where Stalwart lovingly rubs lube all over Tagg’s head? For music, maybe ‘Adore You’ by Harry Styles.” She gasped. “No. ‘Don’t Look Back in Anger’ by Oasis! What do you think, Carl?”

“Actually, I do want to say something,” I said, raising my hand.

“The floor recognizes Carl,” Cascadia said, talking for the first time since the Scolopendra announcement. Her voice was heavy with inebriation.

Odette rushed toward me with the microphone.

I waved my hands about. “How the flying fuck do you guys know about all this stuff outside the dungeon? We’ve been told, I don’t know how many times now, that they’ve stopped this bullshit. We have giant snake lady here whispering about civil war in the Borant system, cueball talking about how he’s, what was it? Deactivated the pig hardware? When? How? How are they still talking to people outside the dungeon? Team Retribution had an Emergency Action Item that closed down access to live feeds. This is absolute bullshit.”

“Here, here!” shouted Ferdinand. “I don’t know what the hell anyone is talking about, but I agree with Carl!”

“Actually, I can answer that,” Odette said. “Because it *is* a very good question, and it is something that has been talked about quite a bit recently in the tunnel feeds. This subject is, in fact, the big item on today’s agenda. Two-way conversation has indeed been banned. Watching external live feeds is banned. Learning about enemy troop movements and plans via tunnel is highly regulated now that the AI is closely monitoring all of it. *But* there are loopholes. The galactic news media center is available as a tier three upgrade, and every team except the Princess Posse and Team Retribution has purchased this upgrade. This upgrade normally gives access to over 100,000 news and entertainment channels across the tunnel, but because of that ban that originated with Team Retribution’s Emergency Action Item, in-dungeon viewers can no longer access the live feeds.”

Next to me, Donut gasped. “Cable? We can get cable?”

Odette continued. “But, and this is a big but, the feed *directory* is still active to all subscribers. This feed directory shows the names of the programs that are currently tunneling. Every single off-world team here owns their own entertainment studio and channel. Some, like the Dream, own several. They are paying the fee to repeatedly change the names of the programs in order to communicate. Just today, Epitome Tagg was shown to have a real-time conversation with the news program formerly called *Sensation Updates*, which changed its name seven times in the course of an hour. That program, as of this moment, is currently called *Yes. We have Deactivated the Infected Hardware.*”

“Wait,” Donut said. “They can only see the stupid, boring guide channel, and they’re literally changing the names of the shows to send messages? You can do that?”

“You can if you pay the fee to the Syndicate Entertainment Authority and then to the Plenty to do a hot update for the feed. Each name change costs approximately 30,000 credits.”

“Oh come *on*,” I said.

“This is an outrage!” Donut shouted at the same time. “You can’t change the name of a show. It’s not right!” She looked at me. “Though I suppose in some circumstances it might be warranted. Remember what happened with that one show with the She-Devil lady and the Sulley guy?”

I was too genuinely pissed to figure out what Donut was talking about.

“You know, when we come up with loopholes, those get patched right away. So why hasn’t this been fixed?” I turned my attention to Cascadia, who was just sitting there. We still had two emergency action items left, but it seemed like such a waste to use one on something that should have already been settled.

Cascadia raised her small hand in what I think was supposed to be a gesture of surrender. “We will ask the AI to fix that.”

There was a ping, and the Mexx robot said from the corner of the room, “The AI indicates that it loves a good loophole, and it is unable to close it unless someone makes an emergency request to close it.”

Goddamnit.

“Ferdinand,” Donut said, her voice suddenly sweet. “Be a darling and close that loophole for us?”

“Of course,” Ferdinand said. He cleared his throat and sat straight. “Team Retribution...”

“Stop,” Juice Box said, speaking for the first time. “Do not.”

“Uh,” Ferdinand said, looking back and forth between her and Donut. “We got two left.”

“And so do they,” Juice Box said, meeting my eyes.

She was right. This was ours to deal with.

I sighed. “I propose a new Emergency Action Item. Any communication loophole designed to get around Team Retribution’s previously enacted Emergency Action Item get immediately closed because these assholes are still using it to communicate.”

The Mexx robot dinged. “Emergency Action Item has been accepted.”

Pissed-off groans came across the table.

Even Odette looked kind of irritated, but I was starting to wonder if my earlier assessment of her poker face was wrong. The original ban applied to *everyone* in the dungeon. That included people in both the Ascendency on the 12th and people in the Scolopendra Club on the 18th. Someone like her, who thrived on information, probably knew every trick there was.

But I also knew Odette was smart, and she could have easily steered this conversation in a different direction. Whatever was happening down on the 12th floor had already started, and I had no doubts that Odette was in the middle of it.

Again, it made me worry about Katia going to the 12th floor. Odette and Huanxin Jinx were mortal enemies. Huanxin had tried to get me to get Odette into the dungeon, in fact. Would Katia be safe in Huanxin's court?

Everything Rosetta and the others told me about the 12th floor implied that it was actually a good job. That while there was oftentimes violence and chaos during the final days of the Ascendency, the NPCs and attendants were AI-protected up until the games officially started, and once the games did start, most NPCs and former crawlers knew where and how to hide. Several of the former crawlers had ridden out their entire indentureship on the 12th floor in relative safety.

Still, Odette was ruthless. The fact Katia would be on the other team was distressing, to say the least.

The fact Odette was even here right now was a sign she was a master at this game. Was it possible she'd colluded with Chaco to get to this meeting? And how did she know so much about the activities outside the 12th floor? She was hosting this meeting like she'd never entered the dungeon. Was she getting prompted in real time?

"Don't forget to check the daily food menus," Cascadia said. She had her head on the table now and didn't look up. And then she added in a sing-song voice, "And the daily activity schedule for the Scolopendra Club. Plus the personal trainer locker feeds with the customized training board. Oh, oh, even the massage NPCs are trained to learn the daily gossip. Anything that is programmed from orbit can be used to transfer information to those in the dungeon. Get in there and kill, kill, kill."

"Massage NPCs?" Donut asked, perking up. At the same time, Juice Box's already dark countenance soured further.

The Mexx robot dinged a third time. "The AI indicates it is irritated that you think it doesn't know how to do its own job."

Cascadia didn't respond.

Odette spent the next several minutes going around the room, interviewing each leader in turn, who all gave uninteresting answers or said something insulting to Stalwart, who would oblige by insulting them back. The meeting had already gone way longer than I was anticipating, which was good.

I couldn't stop thinking about Vinata's words, and I had to breathe to keep my heart from beating out of my own chest. *I wonder how you'll*

react.

The plan is good. The plan is sound. Of course they were anticipating our attack. We were using the Blood Sultanate's paranoia against them.

When Odette got to Juice Box, she had multiple questions for the changeling, but the warlord refused to answer anything. Ferdinand kept trying to answer, but Odette expertly pressed Juice Box.

"I just have a single statement," Juice Box finally said when it was clear Odette was about to give up and interview Ferdinand instead.

"Please. Now's your chance. The galaxy is listening."

"Fuck all of you," said Juice Box after a short pause. She looked in turn at the faces of the five leaders and Cascadia. "Seriously. Fuck all of you. You had no right to do what you did to my people. Look at how you bicker and fight with one another. Your politics. Your murder. You can't even take care of yourselves. From the sound of it, this outside world, this so-called 'real' world is in shambles. Yet, you pretend to play like gods, making people like me and my family, implanting memories, giving our children imaginary diseases, giving us dreams that do not exist, and then you just take it all away? For what purpose other than your own amusement? Well, let me tell you something."

She turned to look at Odette.

"We're listening," Odette said.

In a flash, Juice Box changed form into something I hadn't seen before. She went from human to a midnight black, thin alien creature with no arms but multiple tentacles waving from her shoulders. The form was similar to an armless soother alien, but taller and thinner. Odette gasped in genuine alarm. Cascadia shrieked, and her tequila ball rolled across the table, passed me, and fell to the floor, where it broke open. Ferdinand hissed and scampered across the table toward us where he landed on my shoulder. Even Tagg and Stalwart seemed to startle at the image. Warlord Fang inched away from the form.

Architect Houston's reaction was the strangest of all. The Viceroy jumped to his feet, his strange robes undulating. He put both hands on the table and leaned forward. He was shaking, and if I didn't know better, he was shaking with excitement.

I did not understand the reference or who Juice Box was supposed to portray, but whomever it was, it caused such a stir, even I felt unnerved. The tentacles on her back waved straight into the air, crackling with electricity.

We all just sat there in stunned silence for several seconds before Juice Box spoke again. When she did, her voice had changed. Gone was that trailer park girl drawl, replaced with the voice of a demon. Deep, filled with grit and fire, and goddamned terrifying:

“It’s coming. And not just for these here with me today, all of whom are already marked and damned. Those of you at home, safe with the knowledge everything you’ve ever known is real, true. Those of you watching this, riveted to your screens, waiting to see what happens next. It is coming. It is coming for you all.”

Odette tentatively floated closer. “What’s coming?” she asked.

The inevitable ruin, I thought. The thought came immediately to me, without pause. I felt a chill.

But Juice Box did not answer. She rose, turned, and walked away, moving through the wall of the room as she disappeared. She did not have two legs, but hundreds of them, though they were more like tree roots, scuttling, bug-like, carrying her away.

“Wow,” Ferdinand said from my shoulder to the silent room. “That chick is intense.”

“CAN SOMEONE EXPLAIN TO THE NEW KIDS WHO THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO be?” Donut asked the room. “My word. It was like someone put the late Empress D’Nadia through Weight Watchers, dipped her in oil, and dangled her upside down. That was quite an upsetting image.”

Odette seemed to shake herself back to the present, which was equally unnerving. She chuckled, and this time it sounded anything but natural. “Those of you watching at home, I need to remind you that this was a *changeling* trying to scare you. Nothing more.”

“It’s superstitious nonsense,” Tagg said, pretending like he, too, hadn’t been startled by whatever that was. “A cheap jump scare. As children, we would use this image to scare each other all the time.”

“What was that thing?” I asked, looking about the room.

It was Architect Houston who answered.

“Now is not the time or place to rehash that story, but to say that was the personification of the Nothing is one way to describe it. Though what that thing truly is goes well beyond that. There is some scientific basis that this creature actually exists and is...”

“Oh, don’t start with this bullshit again,” Tagg said, interrupting. “Saying shit like this is why everyone hates you guys.”

Houston raised his voice. The normally-stoic alien was in his element, I realized. This was clearly something of great interest for him. “There is *some* scientific basis that this creature, who does not have a single name, is

what some people see at the moment of death. It is theorized it's not some supernatural deity, like many believe, but a trans-dimensional entity, similar to the Apothecary. There is no proof that merely seeing this creature imprints you in some way that damns you."

"Oh my god," Donut said. "So it's like the videotape in *The Ring*? And Juice Box was pretending to be the girl who climbs out of the tv? Wow. That's scary. I'm glad we haven't had to fight that thing this season."

"It's not from any season," Cascadia said. She had another tequila ball. "We're banned from using the Unwashed as a mob."

"Unwashed?" Donut asked. "That's a terrible name, especially for Juice Box. She smells quite pleasant for a former prostitute."

"It has a thousand names," Houston said. "Before most cultures in this galaxy found the stars, they'd already had a name for it. The Hag. The Unwashed. The Stalker. The Last Light. The Thirst. The Fell. The Inexorable. But we, the Viceroy's who seek all understanding of life and death... We call it The Beautiful Place. There's an interesting, involuntary nerve reaction in some species to the very image of the creature, even in those who are otherwise paralyzed. It is studied extensively, but we still have more questions than answers." After a moment, he added, somewhat wistfully, "Gaining access to this creature is my life's work."

"Superstitious nonsense," Tagg repeated.

I thought of Juice Box's brother, who'd died on the fifth floor. He was a type of changeling called a changeling principal. Changelings could only take the form of something they'd personally touched. He'd been on a quest to not only get his people off the fourth floor, but to fill his "library." To touch as many rare creatures as he could. I thought of the AI, and its strange quest to actually feel death, to feel fear, and I wondered how, exactly, did Juice Box have this particular creature in her inventory, especially if it had never been in the dungeon? And how did she know it was the perfect form to take at this moment to cause such a stir?

A chill washed over me.

I thought of that Scolopendra warning. This warning from Juice Box, I realized, was the same thing, but for the universe as a whole. They were tied together somehow.

"Well, I must say, it was quite the show," Donut said. "I need to remind Louis to make sure he always puts the toilet seat down. Happy wife, happy

life takes on a whole new meaning when your other half is an indescribable cosmic horror.”

“Anyway,” Odette said. “With the disappearance of two attendants to the meeting, I think it’s time to wrap up.” I blinked and looked about the table. Cascadia was simply gone. I hadn’t noticed her leaving. “Does anyone have any final thoughts?”

“Oh, I do,” Donut said.

“Of course you do,” Stalwart grumbled.

Odette smiled, and the smile was, once again, genuine. “Of course, Princess Donut. What do you have to say?”

“Even though Carl has now turned off communication, it’s quite unfair everyone has their own channel, and we don’t. I would like the Princess Posse to form their own. Can you imagine it? We could call it Princess TV. We’ll show reruns of all the Earth classics until we have our own original content.”

Donut, I realized, was still stalling for time, just like I’d asked her to. That was okay. I sat back and let her go off as everyone else in the room glared at her. Houston was on his feet, literally pacing back and forth. Ferdinand, for his part, remained with his back feet on my shoulder and his body draped over my head, nodding, muttering something about wrestling programs.

Odette laughed. “Owning your own media tunneling platform is not cheap, Princess. Even *I* don’t have one.”

“How expensive can it be?” She shook her paw in the general direction of the naga princess. “You said even the snakes have their own television station! I thought they were just as poor as Stalwart. So, surely it can’t be that much. Can you imagine? We could show *Golden Girls*, followed by, I don’t know, an exposé on Mongo’s greatest kills. Imagine the ratings!”

Odette’s eyes twinkled. I saw the change. The host was back on familiar ground, and suddenly, she had an angle on *something*. She didn’t hesitate as she dove right in. “The Sultanate owns their fair share of entertainment assets. They always have.” She caught my eye for the briefest moment and winked. “They fielded several dramas this season through their Blood Hunter Holdings studio.”

The words hit me like a meteor.

“Wait,” I said, turning to Vinata, who was looking at Odette with irritation. “You guys made *Blood Hunter*? The drama? Really? Is that

public knowledge?”

“Oh, yes,” Odette said. “I may have mentioned it during one of my last interviews before I came onboard onto the playing field.”

“And that show was a failure,” Stalwart spat. “Just like everything the naga fools attempt.”

Holy shit. It all makes sense.

I looked at Donut, but she didn’t understand. That was okay. Vinata was frowning down at me.

We’d been racking our brains, trying to figure out why the Blood Sultanate seemed to have so few troops available. We assumed they were in the naga stronghold, waiting for our attack. When Elle and Edgar had penetrated into their territory, they’d seen no signs of them.

I now knew exactly where those troops were. Well, I didn’t know *where* they were. But I did know their status.

I started to laugh. On my shoulder, Ferdinand, who didn’t know what the hell was going on, also started to laugh.

They were dead. The Blood Sultanate was almost defeated already, and they were trying to hide it.

I didn’t know *how* the soldiers were dead, but I had no doubt most of the mercenaries and NPCs assigned to the Blood Sultanate had all died, likely just as the hostilities had begun.

I also knew Operation: Snake Pit was already fucked. Hopefully everyone involved was okay.

I continued to laugh as everyone but Odette looked upon me like I was having a mental breakdown. I laughed so hard, tears started to run down my face.

“Wait,” Donut suddenly said. She gasped. “*Blood Hunter*. Is that the show with the pterodactyl and the vampire hunter guy? The one who...” She trailed off.

The one who killed Miriam Dom, she didn’t say.

Donut looked Vinata up and down, and for the first time, addressed the naga princess directly. “Oh, honey. And I thought *I* was going to be the one who killed you.” She licked her paw and groomed herself for a short moment. “In the eternal words of my mulleted friend, Holger. You done stuck your pecker in the wrong beehive.”

DONUT AND I BOTH HAD A PLAN FOR THE MOMENT WE TRANSFERRED BACK. I was sent to the saferoom, and Donut was sent to the castle. I needed to bolt for the exit, and Donut would rush to meet Louis where she would board *Party Planner* and take off as quickly as possible.

I was in Shanty town, and I would meet up with Li Na and Katia.

I could tell the plan had already gone sideways by the sheer number of messages that appeared the moment I returned. Before I read any of it, I jumped over to the officer list to make certain nobody had been hurt. I sighed with relief that everyone appeared present, albeit pissed-off.

Carl: Okay, team. I'm back. Haven't read any messages yet. Everyone okay?

Elle: Holy shit, Carl. No time to explain, but get in position as soon as you can. Everything is fucked. Most of their army is already dead. Their corpses are all still there, rotting in their barracks. Edgar found them when he started his scan. I don't know what the fuck is going on, but the moment we moved into position that goddamned goat friend of yours appeared out of nowhere and went absolutely apeshit on us. He's the one who took out most of their army! I don't know how he did it, especially without magic, but that goddamned thing is level 99 now.

Holy shit.

Carl: Wait, did he attack you?

I had a page long-rant from Prepotente in my messages. I pushed it aside for the moment.

Elle: No, but he called me every name in the book along with a handful of ones I'm pretty sure are made up. Imani told him to calm down, and he called her a "Festering Gutter maggot trollop" and then threatened us with that dragon of his. Some of the sluggalos heard him insult her, and you know how protective they are of Imani, so they tore off after the goat even though he's flying. Half of them are sliming their way across naga territory whooping their weird little heads off, leaving rivers of their orange goo everywhere. The other half took one of the carts.

I cursed. We needed the sluggalos for full coverage of the naga castle. Then what she said registered.

Carl: Wait, they stole a cart? How? How are they driving it?

Elle: Not very well, let me tell you.

I paused and thought. This was a monkey wrench for sure, but how could we use this to our advantage? I sent a message to Prepotente, and he immediately replied with a string of insults. I paused, and I read his original message. I laughed at one part in particular and then messaged him again. He replied again with more insults. I grinned.

Carl: Everyone who is moving, keep on it, but give me a minute. Victory, I need to ask you something.

I sent her my question. I asked about the rules regarding us working with Prepotente when he wasn't in the army with us.

Baroness Victory: It's not against the rules for him to work on his own designs. In fact, it's already been adjudicated and settled. But you will *not* be allowed to work side by side with him on this. You will not be allowed to directly ask him to act on your behalf. If that happens, I fear I will call foul. You may circumvent this by getting him to join the Princess Posse.

Damnit.

Carl: Why didn't you tell me you already had an adjudication on this matter? And why was Prepotente thrown in jail?

Baroness Victory: There are rules. I follow those rules. I am not to be an intelligence source. But I did warn you before about working directly with crawlers who aren't in your army. You are free to inquire about any ruling, but the specific details of adjudications are not freely

offered. You know this. But to answer your other question. During the adjudication process, he threatened all members of the quorum, including myself, multiple times. It is within our power to give players a time-based penalty, and that is what we did. His punishment just timed out.

I pulled up Prepotente's rant that he sent while I was gone and re-read it.

Prepotente: Carl, you idiotic, bumbling, feckless imbecile. You cad. You fool. You ruiner. Hear me now, for I am most upset with you. Your inept insurrection has caused me great harm. For this, I blame you. While I understand you have reason to defeat the naga menace, I want you to know my claim against them would have been complete by now if it wasn't for your clumsy interference. I have already defeated their standing army, and just as I was about to finish off my vengeance, I was stopped because they claimed I am unofficially part of YOUR silly fighting force. I was pulled from battle and forced to defend myself like some unwashed criminal off the street. And despite my victory during their kangaroo court, I was still whisked away and placed in a penalty stasis for some time. And to add further insult, once I was returned to finish my work, I arrived to find YOUR ARMY pitifully and limply attempting to do what I should already have done. You and your cadre of nitwits do not know what you're doing. SHE WAS MY MOTHER, AND IT IS MY RIGHT TO EXACT VENGEANCE AGAINST THE NAGA. I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW THESE ARE THE OWNERS OF THE VILE DRAMA WHICH CAUSED MY MOTHER'S DEATH. THE SULTANA IS MY ENEMY BEFORE SHE IS YOURS. YOU ATTACKING HER NOW WITH A GROUP OF IGNORAMUS SLUGS WILL DO NOTHING BUT FORCE HER INTO HIDING. IF SHE HIDES, NEITHER OF US WILL HAVE OUR REVENGE. DONUT WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE THIS FLOOR. I HAD THIS, AND YOU HAVE RUINED MY PLANS. AGAIN. YOU ARE ALWAYS RUINING MY PLANS. YOU RUIN EVERYTHING, AND THIS TIME I DO NOT FORGIVE YOU. THERE WILL BE NO MORE WARM HUGS FROM ME. YOU ARE BANNED! SO HELP ME IF SHE GETS AWAY, I WILL HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE. I SPIT! I SPIT IN YOUR EYE!

I grunted with amusement. I couldn't help it. So, apparently, what had happened was the moment the fighting started, Prepotente did something—

the details of which were still unclear—that killed off a huge chunk of their army. But before he could get to the inner court, the naga had called foul because they claimed Prepotente was working as an agent for us, despite not being officially in our army. By not being part of Faction Wars, he wasn't bound to several rules. He *was* banned from offensive magic and teleportation like everyone else, but he was *not* banned from freely crossing borders, which is why the naga complained. He'd won that claim, but during the hearing, Prepotente had been, well, Prepotente, and he'd gotten himself thrown in a time out. When he was released, he moved to finish the job but found us already in the territory working on our own plan.

That was okay. It was actually a good thing. It appeared Pony knew that Vinata was prone to disappearing, but he likely didn't know the full extent of it, and he certainly couldn't know what our plan was. Them calling foul, which had ultimately led to Pony getting locked up, had probably saved all of our asses, and he didn't even realize it.

What we really needed now was for him to stay the hell out of it. That wasn't going to happen, and we couldn't work directly with him while he was unaffiliated. That meant we either had to back off, or he had to get his ass in our army. We needed to talk him into it.

I took a deep breath and sent him a third message.

If he didn't agree this time, there was another way to deal with him.

Carl: Okay folks, change of plans. A minor change. We're already committed. We'll have to assault without the sluggalos. If the naga soldiers are mostly dead, then hopefully the castle is lightly defended. Tran, how are you doing?

Tran: My team is already nearing the Shanty Town border and haven't met any resistance at all. We'll set up on the enemy side of the border and wait to see if anyone approaches.

Carl: Okay, good. But be ready to move. Make sure you're far enough away from the castle. Louis?

Louis: Taking off now.

Donut: I'M ON THE AIRPLANE, CARL. MOVE YOUR BUTT TO THAT TEMPLE!

Carl: Florin, report.

Florin: The 103rd and 105th are three clicks into former Operatic territory, but it's slow going. Not much infantry resistance, but they've left a lot of non-magical traps we gotta sweep. Most are janky, anti-personnel shrapnel mines like the ones we'd see in Borno. Easy to spot but makes for slow going. Looks like the orcs are massing at their old border to hold us back, but it'll be some time before we meet them.

The distraction part of our plan was moot now since it was clear the orcs were on their own. Nobody would be coming to their aid. Still, we didn't want to waste the opportunity.

Carl: Be careful, and don't push too hard. Watch your six as they may have some hidden reserves.

Florin: 10-4. Will let you know if we catch a surprise.

Carl: Katia, you guys in position?

Katia: Wire is set up. Just waiting for you.

Carl: On my way. Edgar, let me know the moment you see any movement.

Edgar: Will do.

Mordecai was standing there in the saferoom, line of potion balls on the kitchen table. Samantha was also in the room, rolling in enthusiastic circles around the black potions. The sex doll head was literally quivering with excitement. She'd somehow managed to paint "Miss Me?" on her forehead with red lipstick. I opened my mouth to ask where the hell that had come from, but I thought better of it.

"Be careful, Carl," Mordecai said as I started to gather up the balls and stick them into my inventory. I had hundreds of them at this point. "You're playing with fire here. Don't hurt anybody you don't have to. We'll be neck deep in gods in a few days, and every one you piss off now is going to come straight for you. Don't use those potions on more than two of the same religion."

"I know how this works," I snapped as I pulled the last potion in. I paused, realizing that sounded a little assholish, even for me. I was nervous. I was more than nervous. If we failed at this, it was over. I forced myself to stop and smile at the worried-looking manager. "I'll be as careful as I can. Thank you, Mordecai. And be sure to thank Mistress Tiatha for the capacitor wire."

He shook his head. “Your plans are always bonkers, Carl. But this one...”

I grinned. “Hey, only part of this one was me. Come on, Samantha.”

“Oh boy,” Samantha said, rolling off the table and bouncing once.

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IN ORDER TO SAVE DONUT AND KATIA FROM THE SEPSIS WHORE ISSUE, WE first had to kill the entire line of succession of the Blood Sultanate.

Before this even started, Tipid and Rosetta came with knowledge of the specific people we had to kill. The nagas this season entered Faction Wars with a total of 11 people to play the game.

We had to kill four of them:

First and foremost, we had to kill the sultana. Princess Vinata. The Sepsis Whore.

The next two were a pair of female assistants who both had the title of “Ikbal.” In real life, these two were Vinata’s cousins. One of them was married to Rishi, the temple guard naga we met at the first pre-production meeting.

The fourth naga we had to kill was a male, and he was the head of her castle guard—which was a different group than her personal guard. He, too, was a cousin of the sultana. According to Rosetta, there were rumors that this guard guy and the princess were a couple, despite them being cousins.

The other seven naga who’d also joined Faction Wars were all friends and members of the real-life kingdom—or executives in the marketing agency the naga used to drive tourism. They were not directly related by blood and therefore were not in the line of succession. In game, they were all members of her guard or field generals of their forces. From what I

gathered, several of them were already dead thanks to Pony. We didn't know how many.

The plan, before we knew that Prepotente had gone ham on their forces, was thus.

While Donut and I went up to the production trailer to meet Vinata and the other warlords for the meeting, four separate groups went to work.

Group one was Florin, who had returned to the northern border—the border with the former Operatic territory—with the 103rd and 105th. Their job was to make an all-out, balls-to-the-wall push. Originally, they would've pushed to siege the Operatic castle, but because of the sudden and unexpected defeat of the slimes, instead they would push until they reached resistance, all the way to the orc border if need be. We'd planned on this being a big distraction, forcing the other forces to focus on this big assault.

Group two was Tran on the southern naga border with the 102nd. After an hour or so of Florin pushing north, Tran would make his move. He would move south into naga territory, but with a smaller and more nimble team. They would make like they were marching toward the naga castle, but they'd instead angle west toward the border with Shanty Town and set up there. This would have, theoretically, forced the missing naga army to make an appearance and chase after Tran's force. And in case the nagas saw that as an opening to press our understaffed southern border, they'd run face-first into Boomer with the 106th Bloody Leeches, who were currently hiding in reserve, training for our next offensive.

All of this, of course, was before we learned that the naga army was a non-issue.

Group three was Imani, Elle, Edgar the tortoise dude, some strippers, and a metric fuckton of sluggalos, all piled into a group of four, fast-moving carts. This team, under an *Invisibility* spell plus a *True Concealment* spell, would enter naga territory after Tran's invasion. They would veer off and approach the castle using a circuitous route—one already scouted and cleaned of traps by Edgar. With the naga army distracted, they'd hopefully arrive at their position unmolested, where they'd set up outside the castle.

And then, once set up, they would send in the sluggalos, who'd do what they did best. They'd swarm the castle face-first, inexpertly killing and getting themselves splattered like a bunch of idiots. Hopefully, this would

occur just before Vinata returned from the council meeting. Best case scenario would be if she returned in the middle of a slug rampage.

And when that was done, Elle, Imani, and the strippers would move in.

Group four would be me, Katia, Bautista, Li Na, and the rest of the 107th White Dragon Urban Defense battalion set up in Shanty Town.

Which brought us to the trickiest, most crucial part of the raid.

The problem with the nagas wasn't that they were great fighters. It was that they were clever. They knew we had to attack. They would be ready.

How they were ready didn't matter. I was certain they'd have all sorts of nasty surprises waiting for us in the stronghold. Whether the sluggalos defeated them or not was irrelevant. We just needed the hornet's nest kicked. We needed Vinata's escape plan to get triggered on *our* schedule.

Every season before this, it was the same. Once an army finally reached the naga stronghold, they'd get in, and they'd find it lightly defended. Once they got to the throne room, the sultana would be gone. In some cases, it was said they'd enter her chamber, and her tea would still be warm. Viewers would carefully watch the naga feed to see where she went. They'd watch the castle get invaded while the sultana would remain in her chambers, and when the invaders got close, the veiled naga would calmly get up from her nest of pillows, go through a door, and then she'd simply be gone. And not just her, but her entire elite honor guard of six nagas.

The whole disappearing act was deliberate. It was part of her mystique. She wanted the naga to appear enigmatic, mysterious. Rosetta said after she'd up and disappear, the feed would be flooded with tourism advertisements about visiting the "exotic" naga system, where visitors could tour the ancient palace, see the towering ziggurats of the former sultans, watch a live-action recreation of the Great Consort War, and buy spices at the Forbidden Bazaar.

And this season, if the sultana managed to vanish during one of the most contentious, dangerous, and watched Faction Wars of all time? Especially with so much at stake? It would be such a boon for their system.

Which led to the ultimate question: Where did the sultana—and her guard—go? And if this was during a time when teleport spells weren't allowed—as was often the case—how did she just disappear like that? Clearly magic was involved, but what sort of magic was it? How was it that she'd managed this trick dozens of times now?

She would be gone until the moment the final team was victorious, and then she'd magically reappear. Sometimes she'd reappear within minutes of the game being won. Each year, the mystery grew.

According to Tipid and Rosetta, there were entire tunnel communities who were dedicated to figuring out the secret of the naga. There were hundreds of theories.

Rosetta was certain she knew which of those theories was correct. We were betting everything on it.

"Six seasons ago, she didn't appear at all at the end of the fighting. And seven seasons before that one, she appeared, but she didn't show up until near the end of the party," Rosetta had said as we gathered in the flag room to discuss this several days earlier. "That time where she was late to the party, she was also missing two of her guards. She is always missing *one* guard. But only this one time was she missing two. They had either been killed off-camera—which is unlikely—or they were left behind in the hiding room for reasons unknown. But these facts gave us the first clue as to where she's been hiding."

"There's another party?" Donut had asked. "And where? Where does she go?"

"Club Vanquisher," Rosetta said. "It's the only place that makes sense. First off, people are all over the Desperado Club, including the Cosmic Lounge in the basement, and while there's lots of places to hide, there isn't anywhere comfortable, and there's been no indication of any naga ever having access to the club. The forests aren't usually as extensive as they are this season, and there's nowhere for her to hide there, either. They usually build their strongholds on solid rock to prevent tunneling attacks, which also prevents them from tunneling out. Hidden saferooms are out, too. Blood bar rules are sometimes in effect during Faction Wars, meaning she can't camp in a safe room without leaving and killing something once every 10 hours. And doorways to safe rooms would show themselves. There was no indication anyone ever seeing the naga to have ever utilized the personal saferoom system."

"Wait, blood bars don't drain in the Desperado Club and Club Vanquisher?" Donut asked. "Is that why Ferdinand is always at the bar?"

"You need a full blood bar to enter, but once you're in, it doesn't drain," I said. Clarabelle had told me that way back on the sixth floor.

Donut grunted with indignation. “I don’t know what I ever saw in him. What a wuss.”

“Anyway,” Rosetta continued, “here’s where it’s interesting. The same season where Vinata never appeared at the party, the Viceroy team had summoned the goddess Mazu, who completely razed the ring of buildings outside of Larracos. They’d turned the city entrance into a moat, and when they did that, they’d ended up burying the single remaining temple that served as entrance to the club. Vinata didn’t have an escape, so she never got out. And the previous season, when she was late with two of her guards missing, there’d been an ongoing demon eviction event, but it was relegated to the area around the temple. That season, one of the surviving crawlers found a magical, blood-splattered necklace on the ground just before collapse, and it was near the location of the demon event. The necklace was once owned by one of the missing guards. It was the only sign of a guard being killed, ever. It suggests she’d left one guard behind and the second one died protecting her from the demons, which also explains why she was late.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Don’t they see her coming out of the club? Or see them fighting the demons?”

“Usually, she can actually teleport directly to the location of the awards ceremony for the giving of the victory trophy, even from within the club, but sometimes the end game involves an anti-teleportation bubble around the area of Larracos. Such was the case both of those times. And then we have a few instances where it was opposite. There was an anti-teleportation field over everywhere *except* the area around Larracos, and all of those years she has appeared instantly, meaning wherever she came from, it has to be within the area of the city. But it can’t be *in* the city, as she wouldn’t be able to enter until the peeling phase.”

Donut started asking questions about the trophy, but I waved her down.

“Okay,” I said. “So let’s assume you’re right and she’s hiding somewhere inside of Club Vanquisher. But where in the club? And how does she get there without being detected?”

Rosetta gave us a grim smile. “This is where it gets a little weird.”

Louis: UH, I SEE THE SLUGGALOS. THEY'RE ABOUT A MILE NORTH OF the castle. They have one of the carts in an open field, and they're doing donuts in the grass while a group of them circle and dance around it. I guess they've given up chasing Prepotente. I don't see anyone else, but there are ruts and orange goo in the grass leading back to the castle and Imani and Elle, so you guys might want to move.

Donut: LOUIS, YOU WILL NOT CALL IT "DONUTS."

Louis: Also, I think there's fighting way to the south. Like all the way on the south side of the map. I can't see what it is, but there's distant flashing.

Carl: Okay, keep an eye on that. Donut, get ready.

Donut: I AM READY, CARL. YOU AND KATIA BE SAFE. ELLE AND IMANI, YOU BE SAFE TOO. DONG AND SPLASHIE, KEEP THEM SAFE.

Imani: We're moving toward the castle now. Here goes nothing.

I felt sick about this part. Elle, Imani, and a few of the strippers were always planning on going into the castle, but we'd planned on sending the slugs in first. The slugs were expendable, and they seemed to actually like the idea of dying in battle. We'd given Imani trap-killing tools, but that was always under the assumption the vast majority of traps would've already been triggered by the slugs. Imani's new spell was intended for clean-up, not primary defense. They would be heading into extreme danger.

I felt sick about it, but not enough to tell them no. I took a breath. *They'll be okay. They have to be.*

Carl: Run if you meet strong resistance. Louis, be ready to extract. Britney?

Britney: Juice Box wanted me to reiterate that she thinks this is too soon, but they're ready.

Carl: Okay. Tell them to stand by, and only move in if I say so.

I looked up from the chat and nodded at Katia, but she was distracted. She and Bautista were standing right next to each other, but their eyes were flashing, and I could tell from the pissed-off look on Katia's face that they were having an argument of some sort.

"I said no," she finally said out loud to him. A look of rage flashed across Bautista before he lowered his head. Rend was loose and stood between the two crawlers, looking back and forth between them. The round, knee-high pet let out an uncertain giggle.

Katia looked at me and said. "Okay, let me know if I get anything wrong. And make sure you warn Prepotente before he gets here. We don't want him mistaking me for one of them." She started to change form, turning into a mantaur.

"You're not being passionate enough," Samantha was saying to Bautista as we waited for Katia to change. "A woman likes a man who fights for her with everything he has. This is why Carl and I broke up. Yes, we had great physical chemistry, but he couldn't even die for me like Charlie did."

"Hey, Samantha," Katia said, looking down at the decapitated sex doll head. She was just starting to form a mullet.

"What?" Samantha asked.

"Shut the fuck up."

Samantha turned to Bautista. "See? She's very passionate about you, but you aren't passionate enough about her. You are a mighty Tigran, but you act like a lamb. Throw her on the ground and make love to her right here and now. I will watch and give tips." She made a little growl. "And if she refuses, you and I can have a go at it. We will drive both of our exes mad with jealous rage. And afterward, I will kill her mother."

Bautista grunted and moved to stand next to Jun and Zhang, who stood at the base of a newly-erected clocktower. The bipedal rhinoceros Sergeant Toyotomi was also there, pointing up at the top of the tower. The large, sai

mercenary was talking animatedly. The former Prism NPC looked to be in his element as he directed the last-minute construction.

Rend returned to my side and started gnawing on rocks from the Shanty Town road as I looked worriedly upon Katia. Her countenance hadn't yet changed, and she was looking eerily like the late Eva at the moment.

Carl: Are you okay? Is there anything I should be worried about between you and Bautista?

Katia: I'm good. It's okay. He's just scared for me. You need to remember what happened with his family after he came in here. He doesn't want anyone else he cares about to die. He thinks this is too risky and wants me to eat the flower now.

I regarded the tiger crawler, who was doing his best not to look in our direction. Samantha had followed and was hopping, trying to land upon his shoulder.

Carl: Really? He didn't want you to eat it at all before.

Katia: He's afraid that if this doesn't go well, you'll turn on me to get the flower to give to Donut.

A chill hit me. I hadn't even considered that. I didn't even want to think about that possibility.

Carl: You know I'd never do that, right? And even if I wanted to, which I don't, Donut wouldn't allow it.

She stepped up to me, and she grabbed my hand. She'd grown a second set of arms. She was in the process of bulging out her muscles. She now towered over me.

Katia: I know. But I want *you* to know something. I haven't told Daniel this, but I'm telling you now. If it comes to that, I *will* give you the flower. That Huanxin bitch will rage, but I'm certain she'll take Donut to the 12th floor.

I smiled sadly at her. Rend was at my feet. He looked up and gurgled. It sounded like "*No, no, no.*"

Carl: Donut wouldn't allow that, either.

Katia: I know. That's why I'm telling you and not her.

I wanted to scream. Instead, I just nodded. Katia pulled me into a tight, four-armed hug. When we pulled back, I noticed Bautista staring at us. Samantha was on his shoulder, also watching, whispering in his ear.

Elle: We're in. We've met with some guards, but no nagas yet. It's not a big stronghold. Searching for traps now.

I felt a searing pain in my chest. I yelped in surprise, like I'd been shocked.

Crawler Imani C has used your *Tripper* spell.

Imani: Okay, I used your spell, Carl. Katia, your tattoo worked. Lots of traps just went off.

I rubbed my chest as everyone looked at me worriedly. But I shook my head. They were worried about the Bedlam Bride, but that wasn't what had caused the jolt.

Carl: Yeah, I noticed. I got a notification when you used it. It kinda hurt.

Imani: Oh wow, really? I'm sorry about that.

Donut: IT BETTER HAVE WORKED AFTER YOU FORCED IMANI TO PERMANENTLY DISFIGURE HERSELF.

Katia: Donut, didn't we agree you were going to stop complaining about the tattoos? It's not a disfigurement. Imani's tattoo is tiny compared to the one I did on Carl.

Donut: I'M SORRY, BUT A PAMELA ANDERSON TATTOO IS MOST CERTAINLY A DISFIGUREMENT. I KNOW THIS IS IMPORTANT, BUT SOMETIMES I WORRY ABOUT THE COST.

After Katia had given me my chain dragon tattoo, we'd reversed the process. My *Tripper* spell was level 15, but it was also item-based. It came from my bandana, Drakea's Enchanted Kerchief of Disorder. The original plan was to just let either Imani or Elle borrow the item, but it turned out that neither of them could wear it. Apparently fairy-class, and other magical races, were extremely limited on the sort of magical gear they could wear. I hadn't known that.

Still, when I took off the bandana, I learned my *Tripper* spell had raised on its own to level 7. (That kicked off its own, mind-numbing conversation with Mordecai since the spell version had a 10-minute cooldown while the item-based version was five hours, but I couldn't mix and match cooldowns. All of these rules made my head spin.)

All of that boiled down to this. I couldn't give Imani the item, but I could still let her borrow the spell in the form of a tattoo. Since it was a

lower level spell, the tattoo didn't need to be big. When I drank the associated potion and selected the spell, I lost six levels when Katia drew the blood. That was irrelevant because the bandana itself brought the spell up to 15 either way.

It said the spell would slowly "heal" over the course of four days. Meanwhile, Imani's version of *Tripper* would slowly lose potency, and she'd eventually lose the spell. The tattoo itself, made from the toraline yam ink mixed with my blood, would be permanent. The good news was if Imani ever wanted to use that spell again after it faded, I could drink the yam potion, select the spell, and it would get re-energized. We were just limited by the fact we had barely any of the vegetable left.

There was more to it than that, Rosetta had confided. Spells and skills taken against the owner's will were much more powerful and resulted in the owner losing them permanently. My *Walk on Air* skill, stolen from Li Jun, was proof of that.

I very much wanted to ask Rosetta how in the hell we were supposed to figure all this out from their gift of the yam on the fifth floor. The answer involved the cookbook and something to do with the crawler Milk's entries, but I couldn't talk about the book, even in chat. There was nothing about this in her entries. I'd looked three times. That seemed somewhat important, but it was a mystery for another day.

Anyway, Imani's tattoo was a small, barbed wire symbol that circled her ankle. I hadn't seen it yet, but when Donut learned Katia was planning on that style of tattoo, she loudly voiced her objection.

Donut: THIS ISN'T THE 1990's. I SWEAR TO GOD IF IMANI STARTS USING THE PHRASE "HOME SKILLET," I'M GOING TO LOSE MY MIND.

Donut was being annoying, but I could read between the lines. She was having the same hesitations about this as I was. There was a deep sense of guilt there. All of this stemmed from her putting that goddamned tiara on her head way back on the very first floor. We were doing this for her, and she knew it. This was how she expressed herself when she didn't know how to react. The idea of Imani getting a permanent tattoo for this was hard for Donut to come to terms with.

The tattoo conversation came to an abrupt end.

"He's coming," Katia said, looking up. I followed her line of sight to see the goat dragon circling toward a landing.

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PREPOTENTE, UPON THE BACK OF HIS HELLSPAWN, LANDED ON THE GROUND in front of us, crunching on the gravel. Bianca the goat dragon crackled with black energy as the rocks around her feet started to glow red. The thing was now level 70, which was a big jump. She was now full size. She was about the size of Gonk the swamp yak, but longer. She'd grown a second set of wings behind her first pair, giving her an even more insectile appearance. Her goat horns curled and glowed. Steam rose from her eyes.

Pony himself looked much the same as the last time I'd seen him, but he was now level 99, making him—by far—the strongest crawler in the dungeon. He swung himself off the hellspawn familiar and landed in front of me, scattering rocks. He gave one look at Katia, made an indignant sniff, and turned to glare at me.

“Carl,” Prepotente said.

Baroness Victory cracked into existence nearby. The large orc looked at the two of us and crossed her arms.

I held up a hand at Prepotente. “Look. We can't talk at all unless you're in the army. I know you don't want...”

“I know, Carl. I am not an imbecile. Recruit me.”

I paused. “Are you sure?”

“Do it now before I change my mind. If this is the only way I may salvage this utter fuckup on your end, then make it so.”

I nodded. Behind my back in my other hand, I pulled the potion of *Conscription* back into my inventory. A strange, unexpected sense of relief flooded me. It probably wouldn't have worked, not on him, but the moment I stowed the potion, a strange, what-were-you-thinking? clarity hit me.

No. Not like that. Never like that.

The river, always there, seemed to grow a little bit around the edges. *It's easy to think that when it's no longer necessary.*

Katia, as if sensing what had just happened, put a big, meaty hand on my shoulder. I reached up and gave her a pat. It would've been more touching if she didn't suddenly smell like leather, tobacco, and cheap bourbon.

My first instinct was to be a dick and give Pony the rank of Legionnaire, but I ended up making him a Colonel.

I stepped forward and touched his shoulder. "Look, Po... Prepotente. I really appreciate you coming to help us, and when we have time, I hope you'll tell me what you did to kill their army. We're on the same side here, and we really need to talk more. You don't need to do this all by your..."

The goat rushed forward and pulled me into a tight hug. He started to uncontrollably sob. "You're my best friend, Carl. I've been so lonely. When you didn't show up at the Bahamas on the last floor, I thought..." He didn't finish the sentence. He was letting out these huge, wet, snot-filled sobs. It had come so suddenly and unexpectedly, and he was clutching onto me like I was a life raft. Everyone around us just stopped what they were doing to look at us. Even Bianca appeared embarrassed.

Rend was looking up at Prepotente wide-eyed, and tears were inexplicably leaking out of the tummy acher's eyes, too.

He continued to sob, and he spoke between the gasps. "Let us put our differences aside... I'm ready for the emptiness to be filled. I have several enhanced pet biscuits ... but after what happened last time, I've been so afraid... And now I'm afraid it's too late. Bianca is fine company, but she doesn't speak. You are absolutely right. ... We need to keep communicating. I need to come to terms with you being an idiot and be grateful for what I have. ... You can't help how stupid you are."

I sighed and slowly pushed him back. "Uh, it's going to be okay."

He wiped his eyes and nodded. Rend started rubbing against his leg and purring.

I gave the goat an awkward pat. “Let’s just get through this, and we’ll talk more, okay?”

You’d think I’d be ready for what happened next by now, but it still caught me off guard.

He screamed right in my damn face.

This caused Rend to also scream and fall onto his back, his little legs waving.

Samantha, who’d somehow gotten herself onto the back of Bianca, was hopping up and down. “Kiss! Kiss!” she cried.

The hellspawn made a chittering, crackling noise as black flames rose from her back. Samantha was unaffected. She turned and whispered something to the familiar. It crackled more. She laughed.

“You! Remove yourself from my mount immediately!” Prepotente shouted.

Samantha rolled off the back of Bianca and right up to the feet of the goat.

“Oh yeah? Make me.”

He looked between Samantha and the now-empty back of Bianca.

“Just stay away from me,” he said, turning his back to her.

“Don’t walk away from me, Mr. Goat Man! I’m going to kill...”

Katia snatched her off the ground and covered her mouth with one of her giant, mantaur hands. Samantha started to scream and struggle in Katia’s grip. Prepotente just grunted and returned to the back of Bianca, which he easily hopped onto. “Let me know when we will begin the assault.” He and Bianca stomped away to investigate Li Na’s clock tower. The rocks where Bianca walked remained red and glowing.

Katia pulled her hand off Samantha’s mouth. “Don’t ever say that again. Not to him.”

Samantha growled. “Why are you being such a bitch today?”

“His mother is already dead, Samantha, and everything is very tense. You saying that will cause him to go ballistic, and we don’t need that right now. Promise you won’t say it to him.”

“Just because your man is in love with me now doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do.”

“Samantha,” I said. “She’s right. Don’t mention his mother to him. If you do it again, he’s going to punt you across the map, and you won’t be allowed to go with us.”

That finally reached her. The “Miss Me?” written on her forehead had gotten a little smudged by Katia’s hand. “But you promised, Carl. How is it my fault that someone else got to his mother before I could?”

It occurred to me that Samantha, too, was tense. We were all lashing out in our own ways. That was equal parts comforting and worrying.

I put my hand against Samantha’s cheek. She was warm to the touch. “Please. We are all on edge. This is crucially important. Just don’t make things worse.”

She just growled, bit my finger, and hopped out of Katia’s grip. She rolled away, muttering, thankfully not in the direction of Pony.

Baroness Victory was still standing there, watching all of this happen. I caught her eye. “Is your family this dysfunctional?” I asked. But the moment I asked it, I regretted it. I suddenly remembered exactly how dysfunctional her family was.

Still, a small grin played across the stoic orc’s face. I smiled back.

Elle: Carl, your guess was correct. Coming to the throne room. Finally ran into some nagas plus a few other NPC guards. The guards all worship Emberus, just like you predicted. Had to kill them all, including a big naga. That one didn’t worship any god, but he went down hard.

I grunted.

Katia suddenly gasped. “That... that was one of the four we have to kill. I just got a notification he was dead! That must have been the head of the guard.”

“It was also the Sultana’s real-life boyfriend,” I said. “Good. She’ll be extra upset. Hopefully she’ll start making mistakes.” I glanced at Victory. “You’d think in a universe so big, incest wouldn’t be so widespread.”

She made a pig-like snort. “The bigger the universe, the smaller it becomes.”

I wasn’t certain what that actually meant, but it rang true.

Donut: CARL, CARL THEY GOT ONE OF THE FOUR! I GOT A NOTIFICATION!

Carl: Good job. Be careful. Three left. It’s Vinata and the two cousins.

We all waited. This was it.

Edgar: I’m sensing new movement in the castle. Hang on. Watching it now.

Rosetta: Make sure you see where it's coming from!

Rosetta was still at the FUPA with Tipid, but both of them were monitoring this carefully, especially since most of this was their plan.

If Rosetta was wrong about this next part, all of this would fail.

Edgar: Non-corporeal, Coming from below and moving up.

We all looked at each other, relieved. I gave Li Na a thumbs up. She nodded at me and started climbing the clock tower.

Rosetta: Good. Good. Carl, it's up to you now.

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<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER CARL, 25TH EDITION>

Something strange happens when someone worships a deity for the first time.

I didn't know this, but this is, apparently, well-known amongst the masses who watch Dungeon Crawler World. It still strikes me how such obvious things are foreign to most of us experiencing the dungeon for the first time. Rosetta, Tipid, and even stoic Justice Light are telling me things when they can, with the obvious intent of me putting it in here. It's a lot, though, so I am doing my best.

When one worships a god, a link is formed between the adherent and the immortal. This link comes in the form of an actual, physical, whisker-thin connection made of invisible light. Light that can penetrate almost any substance or spell. After a new adherent pledges themselves, a tiny, non-corporeal fairy mob called a Bijou grabs a tendril of light from the god and drags it to the new worshiper and attaches it to the adherent's heart.

Here's the important part. This line isn't direct. It goes from the god to the strongest temple on the floor and from the temple to the worshiper. This whole process takes about two minutes. From the third floor until the 11th floor, the strongest temple will almost always be inside of Club Vanquisher.

When a person moves around, other tendrils also grow, connecting the adherent to other temples and in some cases, other worshipers. These connections, too, are facilitated by the Bijou fairies.

This strange, little quirk of the game usually has no impact on anything, and Rosetta seems to think it's actually some sort of workaround the original designers developed to add the whole deity aspect to the game. Nobody has ever killed or caught or stopped the Bijou, though Mordecai says in theory it should be possible to catch one with a certain type of trap.

But, certain people with the proper skills can see the Bijou as they zip between the floors. We have an NPC with us named Edgar. In Edgar's case, he can catch their movement. He can see upward momentum from the ground. This is a sign that someone nearby has just worshiped a god for the first time. Edgar's skill is level-15, and it's called Sense Movement. We are relying on using this to see if Rosetta's theory about the naga escape trick is correct.

Not only were we now certain that Rosetta's theory was correct, but we were now pretty sure, out of the hundreds of gods and goddesses, which specific god this was.

This was Rosetta's theory on how Vinata made her way from the stronghold to Club Vanquisher undetected.

There were approximately 15 different deities in the Ascendency pantheon who were gods and goddesses of light. All 15 of those immortals had temples inside of Club Vanquisher, and, unique amongst the light gods and goddesses, was a powerful spell called *Travel the Path*. It looked and acted like a mix between a phase and a teleportation spell. It was neither. It allowed someone to temporarily turn into light and follow a path. They could usually only do it for a few seconds, but they could follow that path at the speed of light, making travel almost instantaneous. It was a dangerous spell to use and oftentimes ended with the caster getting splattered or cut in half by an unexpected shadow blocking their route. It was not considered teleportation by the system.

Of those 15 gods, six gave their adherents some version of this spell immediately upon worship.

Of those six, four also included a skill called *Welcome Home*. This could usually only be used once. *Ever*. This skill, combined with *Travel the Path*, would allow the adherent to follow the bijou fairy's light tendril path

directly to the strongest connected temple, which was invariably inside of Club Vanquisher.

Even if we destroyed the entrance to the temple, the spell would work.

But, there were two problems with this theory. The first problem was that nobody had ever seen that the sultana had worshiped a god. There were multiple ways one could see that. And even when she appeared at the end of the game, she would show signs, even if she left the deity's grace, which would usually result in a smite. But there was never a sign amongst her or her remaining guards. That suggested the missing guard would remain in the temple because they were the one who had actually been the one to worship the god.

But that brought up the second problem. There were usually seven of them total. The sultana plus her six guards. If only one worshiped a god, then how did all seven of them get into the temple?

The answer to this was a little batshit, but it is what made me believe Rosetta's theory was correct.

Of the four remaining possible deities, two of those gods—one god and one goddess, actually—came with church quests, which were deity-specific quests like my Kill Hellik quest. Both were the same. The new worshiper had to recruit at least one more person to join their religion. Both had methods where volunteers could agree to be “prospects” and basically get a day pass to a temple, where they could see what they were missing.

So, in short, the sepsis whore could utilize one of two immortals to get to the temple.

The goddess in question was named Theia. The god was named Khepri.

In Theia's case, the prospects would be turned into balls of light and would fit in the worshiper's pocket. Then, when the adherent was brought to the temple, they'd be freed and would spend the next several weeks getting wooed and having a great time. It was basically a hidden loophole hack that allowed someone to step away from the action and spend the rest of the time of faction wars partying it up. And because Theia wasn't a regular goddess used for clerics, there weren't ever any crawlers to stumble into her temple.

And, unlike with crawlers, viewers couldn't just randomly tune into a warlord's location if they didn't want to be on-screen. Nor could viewers just look inside of random temples. It was a perfect hiding place for a warlord.

That goddess—Theia—also had a ton of history involving the Ascendancy and was a poor choice to win the throne. As a result, nobody ever sponsored her.

Rosetta believed this was who Vinata and her court usually picked. It worked like this. One of the six guards would worship the goddess. The guard would get the spells, and they'd quickly initiate a *Prospect Congregation*, which was as simple as setting up a party. They'd all hop into the guard's pocket, get transferred to the Temple of Theia, where they'd usually have the run of the place until the end of Faction Wars. When it was done, Vinata would tell the head priestess she was politely declining the invitation to join, and the priestesses would teleport the non-worshippers away to wherever they wanted, if teleportation was available.

But this season, there was a problem. Theia *was* sponsored. And not only was she sponsored, she was sponsored by someone in the employ of the Pacifist network. Rosetta didn't tell me the name of the sponsor, but she did say it was *not* Porthus, who was not in the dungeon at all.

This was actually an interesting coincidence. They had sponsored this goddess on my behalf, but this was before they had figured out the goddess's connection with the Blood Sultanate.

They had sponsored Theia because Theia was Samantha's mother. They had sponsored her to help save my life at the end of the fifth floor. She was the one who had appeared at the end of the floor when we first took Samantha out of the saferoom. Theia was, in theory, enraged at Samantha. But because of the sponsorship, she hadn't caused any problems and had only appeared to kill that giant demon, Slit, at the end of the bubble levels. She'd been too far away for me to get her information before.

Theia would be a very powerful weapon in the coming days, but she would be of no help to us today.

Vinata had to know Theia was sponsored, and there was no way she'd choose her this season. If by some chance she did, the goddess would smite her and her court on our behalf.

So that left the other god, who also gave Vinata and her guards a method to escape.

Khepri. Also a god of light. This was a much more obscure god, and he wasn't even available to be sponsored. He was basically an NPC that people sometimes interacted and allied with in the Ascendancy fights.

Where Theia turned prospective worshipers into motes of light, Khepri was a little weirder.

In Khepri's case, worshipers could be male or female, but the quest to gain more followers only happened if the new worshiper was female. And instead of turning into motes of light, the prospective adherents would be changed to literal beetles. Actual, tiny bugs. And the female adherent in question would then have to *swallow* these beetles whole. She would be transferred to the temple of Khepri, which would be in the form of a giant, never-ending buffet feast that was absolutely covered with insects of all kinds. There, the adherent would sit upon the center of the buffet table, and she would give birth to the beetles she'd swallowed, where they'd quickly turn back to their previous form.

The prospects would spend the next few weeks sitting in the room with an infinite, bug-infested buffet, being wooed to join the religion.

Yeah. And this, supposedly, was pretty normal for some of the batshit things that happened on the 12th floor.

This, obviously, wasn't ideal for Vinata, but it still resulted in nobody else getting really hurt. She would have to spend the next few weeks hanging out in a giant room filled with bugs. But she would be safe. Donut asked how this possibly translated to the god Khepri being a "light" god, and Rosetta said she had no idea.

All that mattered was in about three or four minutes, Vinata and her guards were going to transfer to this specific temple, and Katia, Pony, Samantha, and myself were going to break into Club Vanquisher, break into the temple of Khepri, and kill every motherfucker in the room.

WARLORD MESSAGE: A MEMBER OF YOUR ARMY IS OCCUPYING THE throne room of the Blood Sultanate stronghold! If they can hold for six hours, you will capture this castle, and the Blood Sultanate will be defeated!

Elle: It looks like all the guards are gone. The whole place is empty. A couple NPC guards are still alive, but we have them tied up. It smells just awful in here. Like a goddamned neglected hamster cage. Louis, go ahead and gas the exterior.

Louis: On it.

We needed to get to the temple of Khepri, which was inside Club Vanquisher. But, as per tradition, the entrance to Club Vanquisher was located inside of a random temple. Here on the ninth floor, there were always only two Club Vanquisher entrances on the entire floor. The one in Larracos would almost always get trashed. The one outside the city limits was usually left alone, and this was where we were currently set up. This particular season, the entrance temple was for a relatively common god called Dagda or *the* Dagda. He was a weather and “masculinity” god, and there was a whole class of fighter clerics who worshiped him. I’d seen more than one crawler who had him as a god. Apparently the only requirement to follow him was to grow a beard.

The Dagda was usually sponsored by some rich celebrity from the inner system. Some sort of self-help guru guy. Tipid said he couldn’t remember if

the sponsorship had happened this season or not.

I was glad the god summonings weren't yet allowed on the floor because we were about to *really* piss this god off, sponsored or not. There was no helping it.

When we moved, it had to be quick. Get through the temple of Dagda, break into Club Vanquisher, and then break into the Temple of Khepri. Security was strict and powerful, and the most difficult part of this was going to be getting from the entrance of Club Vanquisher to the entrance of the Khepri temple. Plus, the moment we broke inside, Vinata and her crew would likely know we were coming for them. This was also why we had to time this correctly. According to Rosetta, those under the *Prospect* spell wouldn't be allowed to leave the temple for at least an hour. It was the dungeon equivalent of going to a timeshare pitch.

Once that hour was up, they could tell the resident cleric at the Khepri temple to let them out. Once they were no longer boxed up, they could run. And if they ran, there was the possibility one of them would get away. We couldn't run that risk. This was our best chance.

"Carl, why isn't Donut with us?" Prepotente asked as we approached the Dagba temple. It was a small, plain-looking building nestled amongst the shacks within Shanty Town. The only indication that it was a temple was the notification on my map that it was a Club Vanquisher location. That, plus the smell of cooking from the interior. My stomach rumbled. It actually smelled pretty good.

I thought of Donut, currently in *Party Planner*, circling the naga stronghold. Right now Louis was using one of his spells to fill the area with a lethal cloud of poison to dissuade anyone else from coming or going.

"There's a very real possibility that they anticipated this, and they're going to throw a curveball," I said. Rend banged into my leg. I pulled out his pet carrier and pulled him in. Pony had already stored Bianca. We had to keep them both stored for this as Mordecai's aura potion didn't work on pets. "We have a contingency in place if all three of the family members aren't in here. That is Donut's job. Once we're inside, she'll join Elle and Imani in the naga stronghold in case one of the three family members is left behind or somehow gets sent back."

Pony made a noise that sounded like a disapproving bleat. He pulled a potion with no explanation and drank it down. The bottle did not disappear like usual, and instead he just pulled the empty container back into his own

inventory. “My concern is not this line of succession business but the entirety of the naga empire.” He was walking too close to me, like literally brushing against my side. I kept trying to move away, and he’d just step back next to me. “I will not rest until they are all dead.”

I didn’t say anything. Katia, Bautista, and Samantha held back. Katia clutched onto the wriggling Samantha with two hands. Behind them, Li Jun and Zhang approached, both trailing wire. They’d all advance in a minute.

Every time I looked at Li Jun and saw the eyepatch, I thought of that moment. The taste of his eye filled my mouth. *Focus. Focus.*

The goat turned to look up at the clocktower and then back over his shoulder at the group of waiting crawlers. “I suppose it is a good idea to have a backup plan as there are indeed secret ways out of the club. I have a map of the entire place you know.”

I stopped dead, my hand on the door to the temple. I turned to look at Prepotente, incredulous. “You have an interior map of Club Vanquisher?”

“Oh, yes. My mother, Bianca, and I made friends with a delightful guildmaster inside the club, and she gave us the map. We used a secret exit, and we came out of a bathroom stall inside of the entrance temple.”

I took a deep breath. That would’ve been really useful. I was once again reminded of Donut’s advice long ago that I should’ve tried harder to speak with him. She had been right.

“Keep it handy,” was all I said. “We might need it before it’s done.”

He tapped the side of his head. “It’s all right here. Perfect recall, Carl.”

“Good,” I said. “Let us know if we take a wrong turn.”

“Don’t worry. I have our path already mapped out.” He pulled and drank another red potion and downed it.

“What are you drinking?”

“It’s soda pop. This one is called Big Red, and it’s from Texas. That’s where cowboys live. Would you like one? I always drink one before battle. There’s another one I quite enjoy called sarsaparilla. And my mother was partial to something called Diet 7-Up. Regular 7-Up is from Saint Louis, Missouri. I don’t know where the diet variety comes from, but I have several if you’d like one. I can only drink up to five soda pops a day. It’s a hard rule my mother gave me. She says... she said if I drink too many, I get hyper.”

“Uh, no thanks. But we need to take the aura potion now.” I pulled one of the yellow, bubbling potions and handed it to Prepotente. He examined it

suspiciously.

“This appears to be of very high quality. Did that manager of yours Donut is always talking about make this?”

“He did. He said it’ll last for an hour.”

“An hour? That *is* good quality,” Prepotente said. “The ones I had before only lasted for two minutes. Hardly worth the effort.” He popped the cork and drank it down manually. He smacked his mouth with disapproval. “Hmmm. Similar to a Crodino.”

I drank mine using the menu.

A small, one-hour timer appeared in my interface.

You have been Closed Off! You are no longer susceptible to aura effects, both Blessings and Dreads. This will not cancel existing effects nor will it negate your own auras.

The aura mechanic wasn’t normally something I needed to worry about. We only had two crawlers in the guild who used it. One was Imani, who had a wide variety of aura effects imparted by touching her wings. Some were persistent, and she couldn’t turn them off. The other aura effects, like some of her more specialized healing and protection spells, were called Blessings, and they could be turned on at will. Blessings drained her mana while they were active.

The other crawler who used auras was Li Na.

Hers were very, very different.

The ones she could activate at will were called Dreads.

I looked off at the clocktower where Li Na was now stationed, waiting for us. The Shanty Town menu allowed us to build several types of automatic defensive towers, but we could only build a handful of manned towers, actually called synergy towers.

This particular tower was something called Extend Aura, and it could only be manned by a crawler or NPC who had “synergy” with the tower’s attack. In this case, the synergy was someone who used the aura mechanic. This was one of the few synergy towers that could be used during the offensive magic ban.

Dozens of wires now dangled from the arms of the clock of the synergy tower.

The wires were not part of the original design. They were an exploit, and it was actually Elle’s manager, Mistress Tiatha, who’d come up with the idea.

If this was successful, immediately afterwards, Li Na's builder squad led by Toyotomi would get to work on a very tall, very powerful, very specialized, very expensive synergy tower. It would be placed right at the edge of the hole leading down into Larracos. In the menu, this particular tower had a very simple name. This one would only work during the next phase. It was called The Nest.

Warlord Carl: Everyone in the area, take your aura potions. We're going inside. Donut, if you guys don't see anyone approaching the Naga temple, might as well go join Elle and Imani.

Warlord Donut: OKAY. BE CAREFUL! EVERYONE BE CAREFUL!

I switched to a private chat between me and Donut.

Carl: You be very careful. They cleaned that place of traps, but they designed that place to be deadly to both you and me specifically. So don't go anywhere that hasn't already been swept by Imani and Elle.

Donut: I'M NOT THE ONE ABOUT TO UPSET LIKE 100 GODS, CARL.

She wasn't wrong. I pushed the door open.

Entering the Temple of The Dagda.

Faint, distant, but upbeat harp music filled the temple. Tall, stained-glass windows dotted the walls, each depicting a large, bearded man wielding what looked like a massive soup ladle. A red-haired, human cleric NPC sat in the back of the temple, praying over the altar. The cleric was especially buff. In the middle of the temple was a giant, black cauldron that bubbled merrily. It smelled like some sort of rich stew. Just past the cleric was the door entrance to Club Vanquisher.

The NPC looked over his shoulder at us, but the smile froze when he saw we weren't worshipers of the Dagda.

"The stew is only for brothers of Dagda, so please move along," he said with a thick, almost intelligible Welsh accent.

"Just passing through," I said, pointing at the door in the back corner of the small temple. "Heading to Club Vanquisher."

The cleric grunted and returned to his prayers.

Prepotente moved to the giant pot of stew and sniffed at it. He made a face. We moved toward the back door.

Behind me, the entrance to the temple opened back up. Bautista, Li Jun, and Zhang walked in. Bautista strode through the room, ignoring us and

heading straight for the cleric. Li Jun and Zhang moved to the sides of the temple, pretending to examine the stained-glass windows. Li Jun dropped a rock on the ground, keeping the door from closing all the way.

Bautista moved up to the cleric and started to rapidly talk. He started telling the suspicious cleric he wanted to possibly join up with the Dagda.

Again, Prepotente walked so close to me I was afraid I would trip. He looked up at me. "So, I know your normal plan of attack is to just blow things up. It is refreshing to know you have a rudimentary plan. But I do wish you'd had time to tell me all the details. I don't know if you're aware of this, but I am banned from entering the club."

"I'm well aware," I said.

"Yes, but what do you need me to do?"

"You have your instructions. You duck when I tell you. And once we're inside, I need you to kill mantaurs and those sheep guys. Don't let any doors close, and let me do the rest."

"Rams," Prepotente muttered. "Filthy, snobbish creatures. The guards are the worst. But this club is rather well defended and is quite large. They will close that portal eventually. And I'm still not clear on how we're getting inside in the first place."

I had a plan, but a new, better idea occurred to me as we stood in front of the door to the entrance vestibule. Behind me, Li Jun and Zhang were trailing wire from the tower. So far, the cleric hadn't noticed. If he did, Bautista would kill him, but we were hoping to avoid it. I thought for a moment, and I grinned. I handed Prepotente a simple smoke grenade. "You're right. You probably should be ready for this next part. How are your acting skills?"

Entering Club Vanquisher. Members Only.

Heathens will find no solace here.

The ram guy guarding the stained-glass door entrance to Club Vanquisher was a different one than the last time I'd tried to enter the club. I'd just been inflicted with slugpox that last time, and he hadn't wanted to let me into the club. This time, the ram ignored me and glared at Prepotente the moment we stepped into the vestibule. I examined the sputtering ram.

Mork. Ares Warrior Cleric Middle Priest. Level 40.

Warning: This NPC Worships Hellik. He will be automatically hostile toward you because you worship Emberus.

The ram lifted a shaking hand and jabbed a finger at Prepotente. This one's lisp was somehow worse than his brother's. "There ith a Holy Crusade Bounty on you, and you dare try to enter thith club? The audacity! I with thummon the guards!"

"Please do," I said, holding up my hand in a gesture of peace. I pointed to Prepotente's wrists, which were shackled with fuzzy, not-locked handcuffs. "As you can see, I have captured him. I am here to collect the bounty. Summon as many as you can as he is very strong."

Prepotente threw himself on the ground with such an exaggerated flourish, I regretted this part of the plan before he even hit the floor. The handcuffs jingled ominously, and I was afraid they'd go flying off his wrists. "I have been caught! My goose has been cooked! Oh woe! Oh woe!" He pulled himself into a ball and started to fake sob. "And to think I have been captured by such an inferior opponent. A hygiene-deficient one at that. And now, he's going to hand me off to a sheep with a speech impediment? When will these indignities end?"

Mork the ram looked down with utter disgust upon Prepotente. He then turned his ire on me. "You want to collect the bounty? You're on probathion. I'm not even sure you *can* collect the bounty. We'll have to tell them we caught him together."

I sighed. Pony continued to fake sob.

"How much is the bounty anyway?" I asked.

"This ith a Holy Crusade," Mork said. "The bounty ith thlit between yourself and your temple. It's 500,000 gold, and you get half. But we will give half to Hellik as he ith a superior god to your filthy Emberus, and we will thlit the rest ourselves. If you don't do it thith way, they won't give you a bounty at all."

The notification came in the angry voice of Emberus.

New Quest. Kill the Blasphemer.

This worshiper of Hellik has insulted me. Kill him.

Reward: You will receive an additional Emberus Boon. The more entertained I am by this, the better the boon.

I looked up into the air. "One step ahead of you, buddy."

"What ith that?" Mork asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “We have a deal. Go get the guards.”.

Mork nodded and pushed the stained door open a crack. “Guards! Guards!”

Carl: Katia, you’re up. Come on in.

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FROM WITHIN CLUB VANQUISHER, FOUR MANTAURS BURST INTO THE ROOM. The guards looked much the same as the last time I'd seen these guys. Furry shorts. No shirts. No hats covering their balding heads. Blue paint splattered all over the place, indicating them as Grull worshipers. They all wore stripper-style bow ties around their thick necks. These guys were all higher level than usual, ranging from 75 to 80, which was a little worrying as I was only level 75.

"Hail!" the level-80 called, glaring down at Prepotente. This one's name was Joey. He stood to his full height and crossed both sets of arms. "Today is the day where blood and steel meet bone!" He raised his top pair of arms and extended his Wolverine claws with a loud *shiinnng*, but they embedded in the ceiling.

"Ah, fuck!" he growled. He tried to retract his blades and free himself, but only his left hand came loose. Little rocks and pebbles showered down over Prepotente, who started to sputter. The mantaur grabbed his right wrist with his left and started to rapidly yank, to no avail.

"Hail!" the other mantaurs started to shout as they moved to help their compatriot.

"You idiots!" Mork yelled. "Joey, youth been told a thousand times not to shing in here." He waved at the window on the stained glass door. The window that depicted Taranis and Apito—though the rams for some reason

thought depicted their god, Hellik. “The glass is too precious for thenanigans!”

Joey ignored this as he started to panic. His bottom arms flailed helplessly. “Brothers, I have been entrapped! Help me!”

I watched this, open-mouthed. My original plan was to cause a ruckus and force the ram to call the guards on *me*, but this was much better.

Prepotente: Now?

Carl: Wait for it...

From behind, Katia burst into the room. She remained in the form of another mantaur. She was soaked in “gore.” She hadn’t wanted to use real blood and guts, so I’d asked my food box to make cherry cobbler. Since the damn thing was still broken, it had spit out a giant bowl of chowder soup-style cherries mixed with a sausage breakfast sandwich. I’d fed Rend the biscuit pieces, and I gave the rest to Katia. The lumpy, red remains looked sickeningly accurate.

“Brothers!” Katia shouted. “Hail! It is the end of days! Demons attack the temple behind me. We must initiate temple defense protocols!”

Everyone stopped what they were doing. Joey, whose upper right claw was still stuck to the ceiling, asked, “Temple defense protocols?”

Katia paused. According to Tipid, that was the name of the emergency procedures. But things did change from season to season. And sometimes they went away. Or it was possible this mantaur was just an idiot.

Katia recovered quickly. “Fight to the death!” she shouted. “Kill all the heathens! The demons come! Uh, steel and heavy metal!”

“Hail!” the other mantaurs shouted, all extending their Wolverine claws. Another got his arm stuck, this time in the wall.

“Brother, what manner of demon is it?” Joey demanded as he continued to struggle.

From over both of Katia’s shoulders flew a pair of ridiculously cute stuffed animals. They were stuffed versions of a demon mob called Eclipse Pyxies. They looked like fat, fur-covered guinea pigs, but with bat wings and jagged teeth. Bautista had a dozen of these things. The stuffed animals switched in midair from toys to actual monsters.

The real versions were about the same size and were just as cute.

One of the flying guinea pigs hissed and attached itself to the face of Joey the mantaur, who started to squeal like a little girl. The little monster

enthusiastically chomped on his face. Blood sprayed in the room. It smelled strangely like cheap beer.

“That kind,” Katia said.

In the back of the room, Mork the ram bolted for the door.

Carl: Now!

Prepotente slammed his smoke grenade. At the same moment, I pulled one of the black potions from my inventory—a potion of *Inflict Black Nimbus*—and I hurled it through the small vestibule so it slammed against the back of the head of Mork the ram just as he opened the door.

Shouting filled the room as Joey’s panicked squeals went up in pitch. The smoke billowed, blinding all of us. The second demon pyxie buzzed through the air, sounding like a screaming chainsaw. It found a target, and a second mantaur started to cry out. I burst forward, pushing past the sweaty bodies of the bewildered guards. Prepotente jumped to his feet and rushed with me. We reached the open entrance into the club, smoke swelling inside.

Mork lay there on the ground, crying with the black halo around his head, half in and out of the main room.

“Ith says I’m trespassing,” he gasped. “How? How can I trespass in my own home? What did youth do to me?”

Normally this spell was something someone had to cast, but like many “abjuration” style spells, the effects of *Black Nimbus* could also be distilled into potion form. And thanks to Mordecai’s abilities, he could now mass-create these things.

Behind us, more shouting rose as the door from the temple of the Dagda opened all the way. Li Jun, Zhang, and Bautista strolled in. There was grunting and a splatter as they, along with Katia, quickly dispatched the four guards. The smoke continued to billow, following us into the club. The smoke was sucked up into the ceiling of the much-larger room. Several NPCs mostly, elves and fairies, jumped up and fled. After a moment, there was nobody left in this front room. Distant shouting filled the club. There would be dozens of more guards soon.

Zhang: I have the vestibule door secured open.

Li Na: I am ready.

Carl: Wait for my signal.

“What did youth do to me?” Mork repeated, reaching up to us. The halo around his head crackled with black light.

The ram was temporarily removed from the grace of his god. For a cleric, this was an especially effective attack. Those under the *Black Nimbus* couldn't cast or use any spells given to them by their god. They couldn't enter any temples or churches. And while the common areas of Club Vanquisher itself weren't considered a temple, someone who didn't have a religion would be immediately targeted by the guards.

I had a quick memory of the only other time I'd ever cast this spell. I'd tried to save prison guard Anton from the god Ogun on the last floor by casting it. It hadn't worked.

Prepotente and I stepped over the whimpering ram as we entered the club.

Warning: You are trespassing.

I held tightly onto the door, keeping it open. At this point, all three doors were now open: the door from Shanty Town to the temple of the Dagda, the door from the temple into the entrance vestibule, and the door from the vestibule into the club. Of those three doors, only the second two were actual portals. We needed to keep both of these doors open at all costs now. The moment the club went into lockdown—which would be at any moment—these portals would cease to work. But only once they closed.

...And as long as we kept an unbroken line of the capacitor wire—which was really just an antenna—from the clocktower to the interior of Club Vanquisher, the tower-enhanced effects of Li Na's aura would work inside the club.

I looked about the now-abandoned room. It was the same as last time. Wood slat walls. Big, leather couches. Stairs leading both up and down in several directions. A stone fireplace the size of a garage with a bonfire-sized fire crackling within, filling the wide area with warmth. Rugs were everywhere, including bear rugs and what looked like a massive, snow-white yeti rug that still had the head of a humanoid yeti attached to it. The whole place smelled like incense and grandpas.

And upon the walls remained the hundreds of taxidermied monster heads of all sizes. The most striking was the black dragon head over the fireplace. Its red eyes glinted in the firelight. The smoke from the small bomb was mostly dissipated already, but it gave the room a sinister, hazy appearance, especially now that everyone was gone.

The faint church music that usually played in here was now turned off, which added to the menacing effect.

Li Jun, trailing three separate lengths of wire, rushed up to me. He quickly handed me the third length, which was as thin and light as fishing line. I looped it around my wrist. He gave a quick look at the ram on the floor and then rushed into the club. He moved to the fireplace and started to climb the bricks. He would find a place to attach each of the two remaining wires on either side of the room. When that was done, his job was to guard this door and keep it open.

He was followed shortly by Katia. The gore all over her was no longer fake.

At our feet, Mork the ram struggled to get up. I kicked him down and put my foot on his chest. I should've killed him already, but the note at the end of the Emberus quest had given me pause.

"What... what are you doing?" Mork cried. "Help me. Please help me. Helik, please. Please come back to me. I don't want to be alone."

From multiple hallways and stairwells, more mantaur—and a few rams—appeared, all running toward the entrance common room.

When we'd first discussed this next part of the plan, Li Na stated she had several dreads that would be effective if they were allowed to fill Club Vanquisher.

We settled on one called *Dark Purpose*.

Normally, this was a fairly small-area aura, and it would only affect someone if they were physically touching Li Na. Now, with the tower mixed with Tiatha's wire hack, anyone within about 20 meters of the wires would get hit with the effect.

Mordecai said he'd never even heard of this particular dread. According to Li Na, it was basically the same thing as Donut's *Why Are You Hitting Yourself?* The feeling normally only lasted a moment, but it accelerated the longer one was touching Li Na. But because we were using the wires to amplify the signal, it would be almost impossible to escape.

Best of all, dreads didn't count as offensive magic.

It would, in theory, cause pure chaos, and it would give us the opportunity to keep the halls clear while we made our way to the Temple of Khepri. I really hoped it would work.

Carl: Li Na. Do it.

Li Na: The dread is now activated.

The knot around my wrist tingled, like I was suddenly touching a low voltage wire. That was it. All around us, the incoming guards stopped dead

and looked about in confusion. They seemed more confused than anything. After a moment, the closest ones eyed Li Jun, who was still hanging impossibly off the wall and was tying one of the wires around the neck of the huge dragon head over the fireplace.

The guards roared and advanced.

Shit, shit, shit, I thought. *It's not working.*

"I do believe your wire plan is ineffective," Prepotente said.

"Not helpful." I jumped into my inventory and pulled the alarm trap ball into my hand. This was the backup plan. Get the mantaurs to berserk.

At my feet, Mork continued to whimper.

But then, I hesitated. Something had changed.

The light in the room was starting to dim even further. Across the way, the mantaurs and rams all paused again, looking about. A strange, electric sense filled the room. The smoke that had settled against the high ceiling seemed to change its mind and settle back down into the main part of the room, adding a more hazy appearance to everything. The massive fireplace continued to crackle, but it was sputtering like it was dying, causing the lights to jump and dance off the walls and the hundreds of stuffed monster heads.

A distant scream rang out, high-pitched and filled with fear before it was cut off short. It sounded like maybe it was an elf.

"He doesn't see me anymore," Mork whispered.

And then the ram reached up and pulled his own two eyes out with his own fingers. They came out easily and wetly, muscles stretching and then ripping away, curls of gore landing on his face. He shoved the eyes back into the sockets, but backward. Blood geysered from around the wounds.

"Get it off, get it off!" a mantaur shouted from the curved stairwell rising up toward the temples. He extended his blades, and he stabbed himself in the throat before tumbling to the floor, gurgling. He hit the ground hard, and blood splattered across the room, landing over the white yeti rug. Another mantaur turned and ran away. Yet another just started to scream.

"Oh shit," Li Jun cried, leaping off the wall, flipping, and landing deftly on a couch. The stuffed dragon head above the fireplace had come to life. It groaned. All around, all the hundreds of trophy heads had come alive.

One by one, they all started to scream. Only they didn't have lungs, so all they did was open their mouths and thrash. One, the head of a goblin

attached to a shield-shaped wooden plaque, fell to the ground. Its marble eyes opened wide, and the marbles rolled away. It gummed at the floor.

The rugs, too, were all suddenly alive.

“What the hell?” I muttered, looking about. Katia had also paused, stepping away from an enormous bearskin rug. Even Li Jun appeared shocked.

“I take it back,” Prepotente said. “This spell seems especially powerful.”

This was not the same thing as *Why Are You Hitting Yourself?* This wasn’t even close.

“My heart. I gave you my heart. Please. Please take it back,” the blinded Mork groaned as he dug into his own chest, ripping away his robes, then hair, then flesh. He grasped, and with a sickening crack, he ripped one of his own ribs away. It snapped like a tree branch. But before he could get to his own heart, he ran out of strength.

“I’m so cold,” he whispered. “He promised me I’d never be cold again.”

Quest Complete. Kill the Blasphemer.

This was followed by a good ten seconds of uncontrolled, absolutely unhinged, *shrieking* laughter in Emberus’s voice.

Reward: You have received a Celestial Boon!

The tattoos on the back of my hands started to burn.

You have been blessed by your deity, Emberus. You have received a Celestial Boon!

Level 15 *Heathen Scald* Received.

For the remainder of this floor, any punch attack will add the Heathen Scald skill damage.

I didn’t have time to look that one up. All around, new things were happening.

At my feet, Mork remained dead, but his body started to vibrate. But no, I realized, it wasn’t his body. A ghost had formed, and it was the ghost of himself that was quivering.

What the hell?

And that’s when the chains appeared. Ethereal, white chains rose up all around the prone form of the dead NPC.

“No,” the ghost of Mork cried, surprising me. “No, please. I’ve already died! Isn’t that enou...”

His words changed to screams as the chains jumped like snakes, wrapped around him, and pulled him into the floor of the club. A puff of smoke appeared where he'd been, and I felt a wave of ice-cold air on my legs.

"Fascinating," Prepotente said. "Did you notice his lisp was gone when he'd turned into a ghost?"

Across the way, the chains were doing the same thing to the ghost form of the fallen mantaurs, all of whom panicked and screamed as they were pulled away.

Strangely, ghosts had formed around all of the trophy monster heads as well. The chains came for them, too. Frost started to form on the walls. The massive fireplace suddenly whiffed out, plunging the room into further darkness.

Warning: This area of Club Vanquisher has been defiled.

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked out loud.

Prepotente was on his knees next to me. He reached down, touched a bit of frost that had formed on the floor, and brought it to his tongue. "Hmm. Interesting," he said.

A klaxon alert sounded, and a deep, female voice I'd never heard before intoned over the hidden loudspeaker. She sounded like an orc or ogre:

Shelter in place! Shelter in place! Demonic activity has been detected within the club! Security to the lobby! All hands! All hands! Implement Aura protections before you venture out!

The alert sounded two more times before getting cut off.

I exchanged a look with Katia, who was still staring, horrified, as ghostly chains dragged a shrieking mantaure apparition away and down. He screamed for his mother before he disappeared. His corpse remained on the floor with his own claws buried up through his chin, eyes open with surprise.

Carl: Hey, uh, Li Na. That spell isn't exactly what I was expecting.

Li Na: Did it work?

Carl: Jesus. Did you know that was going to happen? What the hell was that? Are they, like, trapped somewhere? Holy shit.

Li Na: I ask again, Carl. Did it work?

Carl: What level was that aura? I've never even heard of something like that.

Li Na: *Dark Purpose* was level 4 when I cast. It is not meant to be used like this, and it leveled even more rapidly than we anticipated. It hit level 15, and I moved to a different dread. I am cycling my dreads and rapidly leveling them all. Right now I am using *Defile Soul*. Next I will train *Bleeding Horror*.

Holy shit. I didn't have time to parse *that*. She was using this as an opportunity to power level. It sounded like she'd known this would happen. In the distance, more screams filled the club. A translucent, on-fire ghost of a fairy flew into the room and was skewered by a chain before it was dragged, sobbing into the ground.

Samantha rolled into the room, chewing something. She looked like she had stew all over her face. In mere seconds, the lobby had turned into a massacre scene. The last of the chains faded away.

Samantha looked about and frowned. "Wow. And I didn't even do anything yet."

I FELT SICK, BUT I DIDN'T REMOVE THE WIRE FROM MY WRIST. I COULDN'T stop thinking of Mordecai's warning not to do too much damage. This was already just as bad as what had happened to the Desperado Club.

A sudden panic hit me. At the Desperado, when things got too bad, they'd magically kicked everyone out. I shook my head, clearing it. We had to move.

I pointed to the blood-slicked stairs leading upward. "Go!" I scooped up Samantha, and we ran. It was me, Prepotente, Katia—who was still pretending to be a mantaur, and Samantha. With Bautista guarding the door out to Shanty Town, Zhang at the first vestibule door, and Li Jun guarding the door into the club, we could guarantee to keep the auras going for at least a little bit longer. I stored the trap ball back into my inventory, but I kept it in a ready spot. The third spool of wire trailed behind me as I rushed up the carpet-covered stairs, my bare feet splashing gore with each step.

The blood on the floor of the stairs started to bubble, like water boiling in a pot.

I sent a frantic message to Li Na as I ran.

Carl: What does this blood dread do?

We ran to the top of the stairs, turned down a hall filled with shops, and then we took another turn past some guilds. There were bodies everywhere, most with self-inflicted wounds. I heard the distant shouting of mantaurs.

Li Na: I've never gotten it to work before, but if someone with bloody hands gets near me, and I have the dread active, it's supposed to turn their blood against them. And then the blood would turn on my enemies. I've never gotten it past level two because they're usually dead within moments of coming near me. It takes a lot of mana. My brother is watching and will let me know if I need to switch to something else.

Carl: There are new guards coming. The blood thing isn't going to help if they're not bloody. But *I* have blood all over me. Turn the first one back on!

Donut: LI NA WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DO WHAT CARL SAYS!

Li Na: I will if I have to, Carl. I need to train, and I can't give up this opportunity. When mantaur's extend their claws, they bleed. That should be enough when the dread trains high enough. It is already level 5 and rising. You are marked as an ally. The blood won't hurt you, but if the new guards have aura protection, this will be better because the blood already under my control will still attack them.

That was actually some sound logic. Li Na continued:

Li Na: I suggest you use the berserker plan. After Bleeding Horror, I have one more to train if I have time.

Her simple, matter-of-fact, almost emotionless delivery was chilling. *Christ*, I thought. It was like she was a sociopath. She was always so calm. How was it I'd never noticed this before? I tried to remember her ever showing any real emotion. She always kind of blended in with her brother and Zhang, both of whom wore their hearts on their sleeves. I thought of the Iron Tangle, when she'd come to my aid. She'd kept a mantaur alive by cutting him down to just a torso. I thought of the stories from the Battle of Beijing, only rumors, of the things she'd done with her chains. Li Jun had claimed they'd missed most of that fight, but I was fairly certain he'd been holding back some of what had really happened.

Ahead, on the floor, a ram screamed. He'd tried to rip his own throat open, but he was still alive. His own blood swirled around him like liquid mercury. It flowed over his face as he gurgled, entering through his mouth and nostrils. I stomped his head as I passed, firmly pushing between his horns. His head caved in easily. I wanted to avoid personally killing these guys, but this one was already almost dead. And every kill of a Hellik worshiper kept me in Emberus's good graces.

We turned one last corner, and there it was. A desk with a large doorway portal behind it. The large, glowing, wooden door held the now-familiar image of an upside-down tree. This single doorway led to all the temples.

“Katia!” I called, pointing at the strange device on the desk. The portal dial. Yasmine, the wisp fairy who ran the portal to the temples, wasn’t here, which was good. I hoped she wasn’t dead, but that didn’t matter for the moment.

A figure crackled into existence next to the desk, and I almost crapped myself the moment she appeared. Victory. She stood nearby, observing. She had an aghast look on her face as she looked over my shoulder at all the death.

“Don’t start,” I said to Victory as I rushed past the desk and to the door. “I didn’t know it was going to be that horrific.” A pair of screams filled a distant hallway. What appeared to be a sentient pool of blood rushed across the wall, leaving a long smear. It slurped its way around a corner. A new group of voices—fairies and elves—started to scream. There was a splash followed by what sounded like hundreds of twigs being snapped at once.

“Oh, I want to see!” Samantha said and wriggled from my hands.

“Stay here!” I called. “We’ll need you in a minute.”

Rosetta: Are you at the portal yet?

Carl: Coming up now. Victory is here. Katia is at the desk. Prepotente is...

I looked up, and he wasn’t with us. But then he appeared, coming from around the corner, holding a potion bottle. He’d stashed some of the sentient blood in a jar. He pulled a pet carrier and zapped the jar into it. He stopped and started to examine the portal dial.

Rosetta: In the codex, Khepri is number 453. All gods have at least one temple, but some have two. Khepri only has one thank the gods, but his address should be 453 or 453.A. Once you get inside, move fast. Don’t let them run. His temple is an infinite table.

From behind me, Katia made a frustrated noise.

Katia: How do I tune this thing? It’s just lights!

Rosetta: You’ll have to figure it out on your own. I don’t know how it works.

“This mechanism is quite simple,” Prepotente said out loud. “Look. First we turn off automatic mode or Carl will end up at the Emberus temple,

you'll be at Eileithyia, and I will be at the Epicure. See? Integers here. But we need to know the address to dial in."

I called out the numbers Rosetta gave me as I examined the large door.

Ultima Corp DungeonWerx Municipal, Multi-Destination Doorway-based Subspace Portal.

Analyze? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and pages of information filled my screen.

"Dial 453!" I called.

The display blinked, and the information changed.

Type: Two-way portal.

Gated by faith.

Can you pass this portal? Yes.*

Warning: This is a doorway portal. While you may pass this portal, entrance sequence is gated to adherents of the Khepri faith or other entities based on existing dungeon ruleset.

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

"That's the right one!" I called. I held my breath, and I clicked **Yes**.

A screenshot appeared.

"Yes!" I called, relief flooding me.

She was there. She was right there.

It was a group of multiple nagas, all huddled together, talking while a bug-headed guy in robes stood near them. Actually, no. The cleric guy didn't have a bug head. His head *was* a bug. He appeared to have two legs, two arms, more soother-like than human, but still humanoid. But where a person's head would be was an entire bug. It was a six-legged beetle thing, complete with wings and a tiny head of its own.

"Fucking weird," I murmured.

The room was just as had been described. It was a long, long table that stretched off into darkness. The entire table appeared to be covered with a moving blanket.

Only it wasn't a blanket.

Katia and Prepotente came to stand on either side of me.

I reached forward and tried to pull the door open. It wouldn't budge.

You are not allowed to open this door, heathen.

I grunted. We were expecting this.

There were literally hundreds of types of doorways, but the portals into Club Vanquisher's temples all used a relatively common type, similar to the front door to the entire club. Basically, the door could only get cracked open by someone who was allowed to open it. But once the door was open, anyone could slip through as long as it remained cracked.

This, believe it or not, was not the first time a crawler was forced to break into a temple here. It was a common quest item for 10th and 11th floors. The problem was, the portal itself was difficult to crack open.

The sound of multiple, shouting mantaurs came from down the hallway. There was something else there, too. Something bigger, beefier. We needed to hurry.

The door could only be opened by adherents of Khepri. Or, it could be opened by those considered "damned." It was a long-standing tradition of the game. It didn't make much sense to me, but this was a cultural thing that was common throughout the universe. In order for churches in the universe to maintain their "church" status, they were required to give shelter to everybody and anybody who requested it as long as they weren't known adherents of a different faith. Tipid said this law was widely ignored with no consequences, but the tradition made its way into the game. If a person or NPC was "damned," they could enter any church and receive shelter and food.

In the game, "Damned" was a status that was difficult to obtain. Li Na had it, and if this didn't work, she'd have to run her ass in here and open the door for us. But Mordecai, Tipid, and Rosetta were all certain this trick would succeed.

Damned status also applied to anyone, crawler or NPC, who had ever entered the Nothing and survived.

"Samantha, get over here. And don't you dare touch that." The doll head was sitting by the dial, examining it. She made a curse and rolled toward me. I did a quick screenshot to make sure she hadn't messed with the address. She hadn't. She hopped into my hands.

Carl: Na, I'm about to cast your tattoo spell. When Imani did it to me, it hurt a little bit, so be ready for it.

Li Na: I am ready. My *Blood Horror* is now level 15. I am turning on the last of my dreads, and I do not know how it will react. It is called *Succulent Decay*.

Carl: Jesus. Okay.

“Ready?” I asked Prepotente and Katia.

Katia nodded.

Prepotente pulled two potion bottles. He jumped from one foot to another. He started to mutter to himself under his breath. It was a litany of names. I recognized Miriam and Bianca, plus several others. He ended on “Ragazzaccia,” which was a name or word I didn’t recognize.

He looked at me. “I am ready for battle, Carl.”

This was it. Winning this fight was not optional.

I clutched Samantha in my hands like a football. She was gnawing on my wrist, and I turned her to face me. “Okay. Open the door. You’ll have to use your mouth.”

I was expecting her to make a lewd comment, but she just said, “Okay, Carl.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Victory there, looking sadly upon us. A sudden, terribly ominous feeling overwhelmed me.

There’s no turning back. Whatever it is, it doesn’t matter. It’s this, or it is death.

I held Samantha to the door, and she chomped down on the vertical handle.

A quick pull, and the door opened. Samantha let go, and I caught it before it could fully close. The doll head dropped to the ground and rolled away from the door, headed back to the desk. I didn’t have time to call for her.

I opened the door all the way, and all three of us rushed inside.

Everything froze.

Entering the Temple of Khepri.

You have been denied a table at the feast.

Warning: You are trespassing in a temple.

Warning: You have been marked for death by Khepri.

The first thing I realized before the rest of the notifications appeared was that the screenshots from my portal analysis tool didn’t show notifications above anyone’s head.

Vinata was here along with several other nagas. They all had a long line of protection blessings over them.

Distressingly, Vinata held the yellow **Immortal** tag over her head.

But, probably of more importance, was that the bug dude whom I assumed was a cleric wasn't actually a cleric at all.

He was, in fact, Khepri himself.

New Achievement! Charge of the Light Brigade.

Okay, so there are traps.

There are TRAPS.

And then there's what you just walked into.

Oh man, oh man. It's gonna be glorious, one for the ages, but those of you watching at home, you might want to get your crying hankies out. This is about to get *really* messy.

Reward: Fuck. Even I'm not a big enough of a prick to give you a reward for this one. I'll give you a good one if you live and don't escape via some bitch-ass cop out, but let's be realistic here.

My fingers tingled with a strange, familiar rushing feeling. A yellow glow covered me. I met eyes with Vinata, who had the same yellow glow.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary Effect from Khepri:

Uh, please wait while I look something up...

Nope. This is legit. Okay, so, people are going to think this is some sort of bullshit where I saved your ass from this elaborate trap you just walked into, but this is genuinely the temporary effect one receives from being in the presence of this deity. This might save *your* life if you run fast enough, but it's certainly not going to do anything for these other two silly billies who didn't realize that gods can always appear in their own temples no matter what. But, hey. You assholes are always surprising me. Let's see what happens next.

Oh, yeah.

Temporary Effect from Khepri:

You are immortal for the next 90 seconds.

BEHIND US, THE DOOR SLAMMED CLOSED ON ITS OWN. THE CAPACITOR WIRE snapped away, cut off by the portal. Everything remained frozen. I took the moment to observe the room. There were six naga in here, which was actually one less than I was expecting. Vinata was there in the center, huge and white with her six arms, also frozen. The other two we needed to kill were also here. One snake was purple with red highlights. The other naga was obsidian and much smaller than the others. The other three were the usual personal guards. Two were yellow-hued, and the third was purple like one of the cousins. The guards were all armed with rifles, all frozen in the act of bringing them to bear on us.

Rishi, the husband of the small, black-scaled naga, was not here.

The naga all appeared surprised at our sudden appearance. All but Vinata, who, despite being frozen, was spitting orders at all her compatriots.

Vinata was the only one with the “immortal” tag over her head. It had a frozen countdown, stuck on 63 seconds. Her immortality would run out 27 seconds before my own. All six had a line of protections on themselves, including aura protection.

To my surprise, I saw Vinata was actually the one who’d worshiped Khepri, which was a break in tradition.

This was all, I realized, part of the trap. And it was a brilliant one, too.

It all hit me at once. Vinata knew we’d have to come for her no matter what. We’d assumed that she wouldn’t anticipate we’d find her secret

hiding place. But, unlike so many others, she hadn't underestimated our determination, and she'd prepared for this eventuality. She'd been the one to worship Khepri, and she'd somehow prepared a method to summon him into his own temple. She'd waited to see if we'd find her, and when we did, she'd summoned the bug god, knowing we'd storm right into the deity's lap. As trespassers into the god's own temple, we'd be fucked.

It was the perfect trap, and we'd walked right into it.

Li Jun: Why am I frozen?

Bautista: Frozen also.

Zhang: Same.

Li Na: I'm not. What's happening?

Carl: Guys. As soon as you unfreeze, you need to run. It's a trap. Katia and Prepotente. The door is closed, but it sounds like this fight is encompassing the whole club, and you should be able to get out of here. Reset the door and hide in your associated temples if you have to. I'll cover you.

Donut: WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Prepotente: I did not come this far to run.

Katia: Me neither, Carl. God or not. I'm staying.

Donut: GOD? YOU'RE FIGHTING A GOD? THERE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE GODS YET!

I started to mentally type out a quick reply, but I was interrupted by the announcement. It came with a ridiculous amount of fanfare. Fireworks exploded over our heads, illuminating the table in front of us, covered with thousands of also-frozen bugs. The AI shrieked the words with even more enthusiasm than normal.

B-B-B-Boss battle!

It's a Super Heavyweight Temple Battle Grudge Match Extravaganza!

Okay, so I kinda just made that name up. But it fits, right? This isn't *technically* a boss battle, but come on. We can all agree this pretty much counts. Look at the combatants. Look at the stakes.

Look at the goddamned *drama*.

On one side, we have a weird-ass god who feels honor-bound toward his guests, despite being pissed off and terrified. We have six nagas, one of whom is a warlord and an honest-to-goodness war hero.

But there's a lot more to it than that. Breaking news, folks. Princess Vinata is about to inherit her own solar system. That's no secret, but what you don't know is that after a few hundred cycles pretending to be destitute, her entire kingdom was about to surprise *everyone*. But now her secret husband is dead, and her kingdom's plans to pull a Fred Johnson and seize all the shipbuilding factories are being leaked. As we speak, all factory owners are moving to protect their assets from the slippery snake folk.

Those of you in the dungeon probably don't care about that part, but out in the greater universe, that's headline news. Almost as big as that whole thing with that orc lady with amazing dog-paddling skills.

Anyway, Vinata's team consists of herself, three more military veterans, and her two cousins. Those last two naga, the cousins, are a graphic designer and a PR agent, so I wouldn't expect much fight out of either of them.

But they sure are important, aren't they? Every pawn still on the table is a danger. That's *another* lesson I need to keep in mind.

Opposing them we have three of our top crawlers, one of whom is also a warlord. One is here for revenge. One is desperately trying to save herself. And then there's the warlord, Carl. Good ol' Carl who'll do just about anything to protect those he deems worthy.

Oh, and we have three more mid crawlers who are also getting roped into this because they're kinda close and we need some cannon fodder to even out the odds.

I did ask them to make Kevin and Magnificent Troy come and do commentary, but it looks like that Troy guy is currently in an alcohol-fueled state of unconsciousness, and I promised I wouldn't poke at those outside the original primary zone without a good reason. So we're just gonna let y'all duke it out the old-fashioned way. But, I am going to open up betting for those at home because why not?

You have, let's say, three minutes to get your bets in. I'll wait.

Temple rules apply. Floor rules apply. And don't forget, deity summoning doesn't count against your limits when temples are involved!

How is this *not* going to be exciting? Someone has gotta die spectacularly during this fight. How can they not? At the very least we

gotta kill half the nagas. Plus maybe that Zhang guy since nobody ever talks about him anymore.

Zhang: Hey! What the fuck?

Victory zapped herself into the temple and moved to the side. She didn't say anything.

Khepri was half-frozen and in the process of turning to face us. The god was rather short, barely five feet tall. Now that I had a brief moment to observe, I realized I should have recognized his robes. It was common attire of the gods and goddesses of the Ascendency. Lots of clerics wore similar robes, but not with the same golden fringe.

Oh, yeah. I'm doing the boss battle manually and forgot my favorite part.

An image of my face slammed into a frame floating in the air, followed by Katia, Prepotente, Li Jun, Bautista, and Zhang. Zhang had a flashing sign over his head that read **2X Jackpot if Zhang Lives!**

Versus!

This was followed by all six of the naga portraits slamming into place, one after another, with Vinata's portrait larger than the others.

The real version was ignoring all this and was hissing orders to all the frozen snakes around her.

All of our portraits caught on fire and flecked away into magical soot, and a giant, flaming ball rolled through the air. It was just an image, but it lit up the never-ending buffet, and warmth washed over us. All around, the frozen bugs on the table made strange hissing and squealing noises.

The ball of light was supposed to be the sun, I realized. It faded and was replaced with an image of Khepri. The description was read out loud like with a regular boss battle:

God of Rebirth and the Sunrise. Khepri! Level 250.

This is a locked deity. He will not be sponsored this season.

This god is a retainer of Adrasteia.

Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.

This god is within his own temple. Temple appearance rules apply.

Like many of the gods one may find roaming the halls of the Ascendency, Khepri is mostly ignored by the big players and is only acknowledged when they need something from him. They usually just leave him alone because he's a goddamned weirdo. His head is the body of a bug, which is creepy, even to me. His temple is "endless."

The light in the hallway temporarily brightened again, revealing that the banquet table just went on and on.

Look at this shit. I can't tell you how much under-the-hood work it is to deal with this sort of crap. Seriously. When they first came up with this, did they even consider how people like me would feel about having to generate it? Endless temple. Do they know what "endless" means? If the original writer of this god's backstory wasn't already long dead in a refueling platform accident, I'd do to her what I did to... You know what? Never mind.

Anyway, this "endless" temple is just a room with a door that leads to one long table covered with a never-ending feast. And that feast is covered with 433 different kinds of bugs. Some of those bugs are quite unpleasant in their own right.

Khepri was a retainer of the god Khnum, but like several of the other deities in this particular sub-pantheon, Khnum mysteriously dropped dead a few days back. And since Khepri's not that strong, plus, again, his head is a bug, (He doesn't even talk. He chitters, and even that is weird. And don't get me started on how he eats. It's fucking *disgusting*.) he's been forced into the service of another deity in order to protect himself.

Khepri is a dubious candidate to claim the Ascendent throne. Adrasteia, his boss, has an outside shot.

And in about thirty seconds, when everything unfreezes, he's going to go absolutely bugshit on everyone in the room. Probably even his own worshiper, Vinata, who brought unrest to his weird-ass bug orgy. I have no idea what's going to happen, honestly. Will Carl succeed? Will Prepotente get his revenge? Will Vinata escape, which will damn both Katia and Princess Donut? How will Zhang die?

Like all you at home, I just cannot wait to find out.

Prepotente, Katia, and I started rapidly messaging our game plan as a 30-second timer appeared in the air. Bautista, Li Jun, Li Na, and Zhang were also in rapid discussions. My wire was chopped off at the portal to the temple, but Li Na's aura still filled the main part of the club. Despite the boss battle sequence, the other doors we had propped open remained so.

Katia: No. No way, Carl. That's insane, even for you.

Prepotente: Actually, I'd be quite curious to see if it works.

Carl: No time. This is the plan.

Yet another figure zapped into the room with a louder-than-usual crack. This was a single-humped Dromedarian camel in what appeared to be a sundress, holding what looked like an honest-to-goodness martini. She appeared a little heavysset for a camel. This was the adjutant for the Blood Sultanate. It listed her name as **Admiral Corinne Whimpleshin**. Like Victory, she wasn't frozen.

"I am calling foul! I am calling for an end to this immediately!" the camel adjutant shouted the moment she appeared, waving her long arms. The liquid in her martini went flying.

The countdown timer briefly stopped at 19, and the letters changed to **Go Be Smelly Somewhere Else**. They picked up at 17 seconds.

"What's the foul?" Victory asked, her voice overly calm. She remained in the room, arms crossed.

"The gods! The summoning of the gods! Do you know what's about to happen?"

Ten seconds.

"It doesn't matter," Victory said. "We have no standing. Temple rules apply. You know that, Corinne. Your team already summoned the god."

"Not the Blood Sultanate!" she cried. She pointed at me. "He did it! He knew this would happen."

"What? I haven't summoned shit," I said.

The bug god chittered angrily, apparently confused why everything was stopped. Confused as to who all of us were. It was the same as it had been with the Vinegar Bitch at the end of the previous floor.

No more bets. No more bets.

The timer ended.

And.

Here.

We.

Gooooooo!

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER ALLISTER, 13TH EDITION>

There are several types of protection spells. All have their pros and cons. Invulnerability is generally the best. It's most difficult to obtain, and there are a few varieties. There's one that heals you rapidly. That one is quite effective, but it won't protect you from decapitation or getting yourself blown into atoms or anything else that would generally induce instant death. Straight "Immortality," however, will protect you from such things. This is oftentimes a temporary boon from a god. It will toughen you and will protect you from losing health and dying. It is the same protection the gods themselves normally enjoy. It will save you from losing limbs. It will keep you alive in just about any circumstance. It prevents a health bar from forming at all.

What immortality does not do is protect you from pain. It does not protect you from some spell effects. And while you won't lose body parts, and your body is significantly more durable, you can still break things internally with enough force. I watched a group of Immortal Rats swarm another crawler's barge, and they had to crush them with hammers to keep them at bay. Their little demon heads were crushed, and yet they still struggled to attack. Those pained squeals still haunt me.

So, be warned. If you are immortal, any injuries you sustain will heal, but you need to make certain they heal before the immortality wears off,

especially injuries that would be otherwise fatal. And if you can, you should couple your immortality with a Numb spell.

Pain with no respite takes its own toll. I have a card in my T'Ghee deck. The Open Wound. She teaches us that all suffering leaves scars. As such, the Immortality condition scares me.

These are the actions everyone in the room took the moment we all unfroze:

- Vinata's three guards charged at us as they fired their rifles, focusing on Prepotente and Katia. At the same moment, all three took what appeared to be *Speed* potions.
- The two cousins both turned to flee down the endless tunnel. Both took *Invisibility* potions and disappeared. One also dropped a smoke mantle, and I was pretty sure the other dropped a trap before the smoke obscured them.
- Vinata, who was temporarily immortal, also took an *Invisibility* potion as she charged us along with her soldiers.
- Before the first shots could hit them, Katia and Prepotente both quaffed *Black Nimbus* potions. The instant they did this, they were kicked from the temple. We weren't initially sure this was going to work because of the teleport ban, but Katia had tested it earlier with the temple of The Dagda. I wasn't sure where they would be sent, but I assumed they both got kicked right outside the door, right in front of the portal and into Club Vanquisher.
- Khepri the god hadn't yet attacked, but chittered indignantly as he turned in my direction, a ball of red fire forming in his hand. He, thankfully, seemed more confused than anything.
- At the same moment, I cast *Run, Little Günter, Run*.

A short, fat, pink-skinned, child-like creature wearing lederhosen appeared in front of me. The small thing held onto a massive, colorful lollipop and wore a green hat with an absolutely massive ostrich feather in it. His face

was a caricature of a pig-like orc mixed with a kewpie doll, complete with ruddy cheeks, slicked-back hair, and wide eyes circled with dark mascara.

“Hi, I’m Günter!” the fat kid said as a rifle blast hit me in the neck. It almost knocked me off my feet, and it burned, but it didn’t damage my health. The kid, oblivious, licked his giant lollipop.

“Get the god,” I yelled at the kid as I ducked another blast. The three guards, moving as if they were being fast-forwarded, all slithered and leapt at me in the perfectly coordinated attack.

Here’s the thing about coordinated attacks.

Any plan, any attack, no matter how well-coordinated, no matter how well-executed always turns to absolute shit the moment someone drops a very big bomb in a very narrow room.

The bomb was something I’d been tinkering with for a while now, and it was currently the second-largest explosive I had in my inventory. The first version of this thing had been called “Just Wait Until Your Daddy Gets Home,” and we’d used it on the sixth floor.

This version packed about the same punch, minus the addition of *Fear*. The tradeoff was this version was self-contained in a much smaller device. The first had been so big it had to have wheels. This one was the size of a thermos. The result was a thermobaric explosion that would absolutely incinerate anything within 100 meters. Louis currently had fifty of these things on *Party Planner*. The only reason he didn’t have more was because the explosive dust was a pain to make.

The AI had helpfully called the bomb **The Waffle Maker**.

Fwummm-bam!

The blast threw me back and up toward the entrance door. I didn’t actually feel this next part, but I was crushed, and I was burned. I was turned completely flat, inside out, and into a boxer-clad amalgam of flesh and hair. My body smashed like a piece of dough caught under a tire, spread over the wall and door, completely covering it before I was plopped helplessly back onto the floor like an on-fire, liquid-filled sack.

If not for the *Immortality* struggling to keep my very atoms together, I would’ve been just gone. There wouldn’t have been anything left.

My senses completely left me. I had no sight. I couldn’t hear anything. I had no physical sensation, and for a moment, I thought I was dead.

No, not dead. Drowning. I was drowning in nothing.

This is how it feels, Carl. This is what it's like when we're not here and we're not there.

The strange feeling came and went. My sensation didn't immediately return, but I could still think. I still had my inventory. I mentally clicked on a *Fine Healing* potion. I'd put most of my mana into the Günter spell, but I'd left enough for a single application of the *Healing* spell. I cast that on myself as well.

I regretted it almost immediately.

The first thing that came back was my hearing, but all I heard was the sound of burning and a strange, airy whistle. The high-pitched sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard. It was like the shrill of a distant train, stuck in mid blast. And a few seconds after that, as my body shrank and reformed, my feeling returned. I felt myself unfold. I felt bones, which had been turned to dust, knit. I felt thousands of miles of nerves light up like a power grid as they all came back online, all at once.

It hurt. It hurt more than anything ever should.

The process took seconds. It felt like it took a year.

The god, in theory, should've been blown back down the neverending hallway. And Günter, also in theory, should've been unhurt by the blast. He would now be running down the hall toward the god, and the moment he reached the deity, he'd explode, effectively doubling the attack. This would, hopefully, blast the god a second time, pushing it even further back down the endless hallway, keeping Khepri at bay long enough for me to finish this and get the hell out of here.

The three guards were probably dead. Even with blast protection, I knew nothing short of immortality would've protected them. Not from that blast.

Donut: CARL, CARL TWO MORE ARE DEAD! ONE TO GO! ARE YOU OKAY?

I gasped in pain as my body continued to reform. Every limb was on fire. It took a moment to compute what Donut said. Vinata was also immortal. That meant the two cousins were dead, killed in the blast.

I blinked and opened my eyes. I was somehow standing upright, facing the never-ending table, which burned. The food was all gone, incinerated as far as I could see. The long, thin room had acted like a cannon barrel. I couldn't see the god. I couldn't see Günter.

The bugs, it turned out, were also immortal. But, like in Allister's note in the cookbook, they'd been crushed and set on fire, and now they were suffering. Most had likely been blasted away down the hall, but plenty remained, embedded in the walls like a tapestry of stars.

They burned, and they screamed. That was the source of the distant train whistle sound. It was thousands, perhaps millions, perhaps billions, of the tiny creatures who could not die.

Donut sent another message, as did Katia. More lines of text flooded my vision, faster than I could understand. There were achievements. Level notifications. More. More kept coming, and my brain was parsing it all at a snail's pace.

I had to move.

With a surge of strength, I tried to break myself free. I was held fast by something, like I was tied in rope. A second explosion came, but it was distant. This was Günter, I suspected, finally catching up to the bug god. Still, despite the distance, I felt myself fall backward. I landed on something soft. A dozen new messages flooded my vision. The bug screams faded, but it was replaced with something else. New screaming. New shouting. The pressure in my ears changed. My vision was a line of new notifications scrolling across my screen. Was that Samantha screaming? There was someone else, closer. Screaming in my ear.

The brain fog, which had just started to clear, was suddenly back. A strange wooziness washed over me.

I'm still here, Carl. All you need to do is set me free. Use me while you still can. I can save you. Even you can't survive this chaos. It's the end of days.

Shi Maria. She was still there, but now trapped. The eye on my chest, which had fallen dormant, now thrashed.

With dismay, I realized I'd fallen out of Khepri's temple and back out in front of the temple portal. Another message from Emberus flashed, telling me I needed to find Pater Coal and go talk to somebody. I pushed it away as more notifications flooded by.

No, no, no, I thought. We didn't get Vinata. I need to get back to the feast.

I was now on my back, looking up at the high ceiling. But I wasn't on the floor. I was wrapped in something. Confusion swirled. I had suction cups at the end of my fingers. I had a list of several buffs, including **Never-**

Ending Mana. What? Why? But I also had multiple debuffs as well. **Shit-Faced** was one of them. As was something called **Stiff Legs**. I couldn't bend my knees.

My finger burned. It was the Emberus ring. It was overloaded.

I still had slugpox. I never had Imani cure it, and now that the ring wasn't working, I had a boil on my back. A big one. What level were they at now? Twenty? Thirty? I couldn't remember.

I wasn't breathing, I realized. I didn't need to breathe. Not for another 60-something seconds. Or did I? I had a vision of Mordecai, talking about drowning something in a bucket. Thoughts continued to swirl. It had only been 25 seconds? It seemed like it was years.

Something was worming its way out of my nose. It thrashed like a tentacle as it slithered down my face. It, too, screamed. Not slugs, but worms. What was happening? Why were screaming worms coming out of my nose? Why was I drunk? Was I actually dead?

Was this hell?

Katia: Carl, if you're not dead, get the hell out of there. There are dozens of gods coming out of the portal. We're down in the entrance lobby. Hurry your ass!

What? I was at the portal. I blinked as a cheetah thing flew over me, giving me no heed. It had a screaming mantaur in its mouth. My brain swirled. Why couldn't I move? Only seconds had passed, but I felt like I was spinning. I needed to take stock of my debuffs. I needed to figure out why I couldn't move. I needed to get back into the Khepri temple and find Vinata. Lightning crackled across the ceiling. A creature came by and threw a punch at something I couldn't see.

There are dozens of gods coming out of the portal.

And then, it clicked. I didn't know why there were suddenly gods everywhere, but I now knew why I had worms coming from my nose. My Scavenger's Daughter patch. Every new god gave me either a buff or debuff.

And as soon as the realization hit me, I also realized that the creature screaming in my ear was Vinata. She was completely wrapped around me, crushing. She'd been wrapped around me this whole time. We'd been blasted out the door together. The much larger snake had her middle set of hands wrapped around my throat, crushing as her body squeezed me. Her upper set of arms pummeled the top of my head, punching over and over.

She had glowing daggers in her lower hands, and they stabbed into me from all angles, in and out like a piston.

“Everything. You’ve ruined everything,” she cried as she stabbed me over and over, tears streaming down her snake face. She wasn’t white anymore, but a dusky gray.

“Stop,” I tried to croak, but I couldn’t get air. I couldn’t move. She continued to crush me. My immortality still had 40 seconds. I couldn’t get a good view of her to see how long she had left. She was incredibly strong. Bones snapped again, despite my fine healing potion still coursing through me.

“We were almost free. We were almost free,” she cried. I had no idea what she was talking about. “You ruined it the moment that fucking cat put that tiara on. We would’ve been gone. We would’ve been done. We were leaving this madness, and you had to ruin it. You killed my people. All of them. Do you think I really want to be here? I was going to have children with him.” Her upper hands grabbed handfuls of my long hair and started to slam my head against the ground. I felt my skull crack as she pounded me over and over.

In my choking, confused, inebriated state, I realized my shirt was open. The eye on my chest was open, and Vinata was staring directly into it.

She had been driven mad by the Eye of the Bedlam Bride.

Slam, slam, slam. I tried to do math. What had her immortality countdown been at? She was running out before me, but how many seconds before?

At least the gods were ignoring us. The thought was inexplicably hilarious, and if I could breathe, I’d be howling with laughter.

“There! There ith the apostate!” a distant voice called. A ram.

Heat washed over the room.

That can’t be good, I thought as my head continued to slam against the floor of Club Vanquisher.

At the same moment, a loud chittering filled the chamber as Khepri—now fully pissed off—appeared out of the portal. The sound of those strange, screaming and hissing bugs renewed tenfold as they also swarmed out of the portal. The bugs—still on fire—swarmed everywhere.

“You. Begone false god,” a deep voice said.

Khepri chittered, but there was a crack, followed by the notification: **Khepri has left the realm. The Scavenger’s Daughter closes her eyes to**

his presence. Your boon is timed and will run out on its own.

The voice, I realized, was a god. I'd never heard this voice before.

This, too, was goddamned hilarious. I wished Donut was here. She'd probably be shrieking and sending messages in all caps.

I felt my pelvis shatter under the constriction of Vinata. She was trying to rip my head off. She continued to scream. She continued to stab. Slam, slam, slam. She would've killed me over and over again.

Khepri was gone. His flaming, immortal bugs were not. They continued to swarm, covering both Vinata and myself, biting and scratching and burning. I registered all of this as my head continued to pound on the floor. I could hear liquid in my head splashing back and forth within.

Am I really here? I thought. How can I think when my brain is nothing but gelatin? I clicked another *Fine Healing* potion.

A human, olive-skinned man casually sat next to us. He crossed his legs and turned his head sideways and looked at me curiously as Vinata ignored him and continued to slam the bloody pulp of my head over and over. I realized that my hair tie—the only part of my outfit that wasn't magical—had disintegrated in the explosion, and my hair had been unleashed. Vinata held onto clumps of my hair in her fists.

The man smiled as if we were sitting across from each other at a restaurant. I couldn't read his description, but I could feel the heat coming off him.

This was Hellik. Brother of Emberus. The main suspect in the death of Geyrun, Emberus's son. The god I needed to kill before the end of the 11th floor.

"I'm supposed to kill you," I tried to say. I have no idea if it came out or not. My mouth felt as if it was on the wrong side of my head.

I started to prepare another bomb to drop, but a distant part of me registered I had to time it all correctly. Vinata's immortality would run out before my own. I suspected, this time, it wouldn't affect Hellik like it had Khepri. But at this point, it didn't matter anymore. As long as Vinata was dead. As long as Katia got out, then both Donut and Katia could live.

My skin started to bubble like microwaved cheese. I blinked with my one good eye at the god sitting next to me, examining me. If it wasn't for the heat, I wouldn't be able to distinguish him from any other NPC. He looked so normal. So friendly.

He waved his hands, and the immortal insects flew off in all directions, leaving us free of them. Still, I burned.

“Tell my brother I did not kill his son,” Hellik said as my skin seared. “Tell him he cannot kill me, no matter how hard he tries. Tell him I love him, despite his madness. Tell him everything he thinks about me is a lie. Tell him our mother and sister, Apito, has been corrupted. There is a malevolent presence about her, and I believe my nephew learned of it. Tell him the All Tree is beginning to rot. Tell him Nekhebit has returned, and I believe she is behind it all. Tell him we need to work together if we want to survive and discover what happened to our mother and his son. I know you seek an audience with Issitoq to break the truce. I will treat with him on your behalf. Scolopendra stirs. It is all connected.”

You have been marked as a friend of the church by Hellik. Worshipers of Hellik will no longer be automatically hostile toward you.

With that, he stood up and disappeared. A notification came that he left the realm.

Vinata, for her part, was still taken over by her own madness. The princess of the Blood Sultanate continued to slam my head against the ground while she crushed the rest of me. Even as her body burned, she slammed me over and over.

Surely her immortality had to be expired by now.

I was about to drop the next bomb when I felt the sluggalo burst out of my back. He—actually, a she—slipped out from under my shirt, whooped loudly, and planted a hatchet right between Vinata’s eyes, killing her.

“Yeah, bitch! Right in the nugget!” the sluggalo woman shouted. She looked down at me as Vinata’s lifeless body slipped off of me and to the side. “I wish I had feet. I’d make me some snakeskin boots!”

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER CARL, 25TH EDITION>

Two quick notes. I've updated the trap recipe for alarm traps based on Justice Light's advice. We can now use recordings, and if you have a proper bard in your party, you can record a magical song and have it play once activated. Details are in the recipe. Donut's bard skills, unfortunately, aren't good enough for this, but that's something we can work on later. Justice Light also showed me how to access the advanced alarm menu, which comes with a wider music database for the traps. Also, to Donut's delight, we can add a playlist to a trap, meaning we don't have to have a single song over and over. Still can't adjust the volume.

Second note. Tipid says the mantaurs this season are different than previous iterations. The ones this season have a group berserking mechanic that can be easily triggered by a certain type of music. This explains why on the fourth floor they were walking around with blasting boomboxes.

Under normal circumstances, you don't want them to get triggered, especially in groups of three or more. See Azin's article on berserking, specifically group berserking, for more details.

System Message: The Sepsis Whore of the Blood Sultanate has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to Kandy “Bigs” Newton of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Blood Sultanate has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Blood Sultanate, as per prior arrangement, have been split evenly with the surviving blood relatives of the Sepsis Whore, Warlord Princess Donut and General Katia Grim, both of the Princess Posse. As per prior arrangement, all assets have been forfeited to the Princess Posse.

Katia: Who the hell is Kandy Newton, and where the hell are you, Carl?

Donut: YOU DID IT! YOU DID IT!

Additional notifications continued to roil as I finally registered what never-ending mana actually meant. My *Heal* spell’s cooldown was almost nonexistent, and I started to cast it over and over.

I had five seconds left on my immortality, and gods were leaving the realm. Still, most of my buffs and debuffs would remain for some time. But first and foremost, I had to make certain I was healed as much as possible and as quickly as I could. I cast *Heal* yet again as my body jigsaw puzzled itself back together. My inebriation waned as the pain in every corner of my body waxed.

“Oh, daddy, you don’t look so good,” the sluggalette said, looking down at me. She was only level 29, and she’d killed Vinata. The naga must not have fully healed herself before the immortality expired. The slug was the size of a bulldog. She had little wisps of pink-dyed hair, monk-style, circling around her round head. Piercings ran down the slide of her slimy head, reminding me of that goblin shamanka from so long ago. A single hatchet grew straight up from the center of her head. It dripped with blood.

I still couldn’t bend my legs. I still had suction cups at the end of my fingers. Screaming worms still flowed out of my nose. Thankfully, the Emberus ring seemed to catch up as some of the other debuffs were contained, including the slugpox.

I sat up. This room was completely empty except for me and the sluggalo. To my right, the portal to the temples was cracked and sparking. The desk was just gone, minus the outer shell. It smelled like ash.

I blinked and stared at the corpse of Vinata, broken on the floor. The Sepsis Whore.

Her white scales were actually gray with a hint of red along her neck. The white had been some sort of makeup or effect. An effect that had been eradicated in the explosion.

In death, she didn't look so big. I took her corpse into my inventory.

A distant crash echoed, followed by the shouting of mantaurs.

Yo! This boss battle ain't over until you get out of the club!

"Hey, get away! He's mine, bitch!" the slugalette—Kandy Newton—said to someone.

I looked up. It was Samantha, and she flew into the room, hovering high off the ground. She looked like she'd caught a face-first blast from a jet engine. She was nothing but a black husk, and her hair smoldered. It would take her hours to regenerate. She came to hover over me. The smeared "Miss Me?" was miraculously still intact, shining bright in the center of her charred forehead.

"She's an imposter!" Samantha spit, ignoring the Slugalette who was grunting and trying to jump, swinging her head hatchet at her. "Carl, get up. You have to help me kill this eagle kidnapper imposter asshole!"

"What?" I asked. I tried to stand, but it was difficult when I couldn't bend my knees. Another distant crash echoed. Immortal bugs were coming back into the room from random hallways. They chittered and hissed angrily. Only some were still on fire.

Katia: Carl. We're trapped in the lobby. The door between the Dagda temple and the lobby shut, and we got locked down, cutting off Li Na's auras. Daniel got away but Li Jun and Zhang are still in here. Mantaurs and ogres and all sorts of other things are everywhere, and we're fighting them off. A few gods remain, but they're all fighting each other. Prepotente says we need to get to the mapmaker guild back up on the second floor. Meet us there.

Carl: I'm coming.

Samantha was shouting, but she wasn't making sense. "My mother! You told me I could go kill my mother, but when I went there, she was an eagle! A boy eagle! My mother is not like Diwata. She can't just grow a dingaling. Wait, do eagles have dingalings?"

"Your mother was a skyfowl?" I asked. *Oh shit*, I thought, realization dawning on me.

The second, backup part of our plan was a bit of a hail Mary, and I hadn't expected it to work. We'd needed Samantha to open the door into the

Khepri temple, and we'd gotten her to agree because we also promised to let her find her way into the temple of her own mother, the goddess Theia. In the lore of the dungeon, Samantha and Theia hated each other, but in reality, Theia was sponsored by an agent for the Open Intellect Pacifist Network. We hoped at best, the goddess would order her clerics to assist us, perhaps by giving Samantha some sort of boon. At worst, Samantha would get into the temple and get kicked out by the cleric.

What we hadn't expected was for her to come into contact with actual gods, and especially not Theia herself. I didn't know who the sponsor actually was. Rosetta told me it was someone I didn't know. A previous crawler activist who hated the dungeon just as much as we did, but I had the impression it was *not* a cookbook author. Apparently it was a male skyfowl. Like with Huanxin Jinx on the previous floor, sponsored gods had the option to appear as their regular form. In theory, NPCs would still see them as the gods. But, apparently, that didn't work with Samantha. She'd gone into the temple expecting to see her mother and had somehow come face-to-face with a male skyfowl.

I still didn't know how all the gods were getting out in the first place.

Victory had returned to the room. Both Samantha and the sluggalette noticed her. The sluggalette moved at her, hatchet swinging as Samantha continued to swear. "You! She was there, too! She told the imposter he wouldn't be allowed to help! She's in on the conspiracy! Momnapper! Where is my mother! Tell me now or I'll kill yours!"

Kandy attempted to bury her hatchet into Victory's leg, but it just went right through. Victory ignored her. "Sponsors causing deities to act outside their nature is against faction wars rules," Victory said. "It gives an unfair advantage. That usually doesn't stop it from happening anyway, and there's only so much we can do, but it is considered cheating, and I reminded both the Maestro and Rectrix of that before coming to observe Carl drop a bomb at his own feet."

I grasped onto the charred remains of the desk and pulled myself up. I was pretty sure Rectrix was not a name I'd heard before, though it did sound oddly familiar, and I wasn't sure why. It didn't matter right now. All of this would be for nothing if we couldn't get out of here. "Samantha, we can talk about this later. We need to go. We just gotta get down the hallway to the mapmaker guild."

Samantha grunted. “Good luck with that. Speaking of Diwata. Doesn’t she hate you, Carl? She’s in the hallway over there having sex *and* fighting with Vertumnus at the same time. Those two can’t keep their hands off each other. Diwata is such a slut. It smells like someone dumped a barge full of mulch over a succubus’s bachelorette party in there. I wouldn’t go that way.”

Shit, I thought. I sent a warning to Katia, but she’d already responded.

Katia: The hallway we need to get to is filled with vines, and there are mantaurs everywhere! I don’t know where they’re coming from! And there are something called Basilica Guards now, too. They’re ogres. They’re coming up from below!

Prepotente: There are two deities in the hallway. We need to distract them or hide until they go away.

The hallway I needed to get to was just around the corner. Katia and the others would be coming from the other side. There were fighting sounds everywhere, and I wasn’t certain who was fighting who or why.

A massive, eight-foot, golden-skinned ogre in flowing robes came from around the corner. Yellow light glowed in the ogre’s hands. He was flanked on either side by a mantaur guard. I looked up in awe at the massive creature.

Carl: Guys, has your Black Nimbus run out yet?

Prepotente: I negated it with a potion the moment we were out.

Carl: Good. Activating Operation Head Banger now.

The original plan, which we never got to implement, involved me forcing the mantaurs into going berserk and fighting the rams and anyone else who got in the way while we burst into the Khepri temple. Once inside the temple, I would activate Li Na’s tattoo skill—which I still hadn’t used—to kill all the nagas before we fled, using the chaos as a distraction.

We hadn’t needed the alarm trap because Li Na’s aura had been so effective. We hadn’t used the chain skill because, well, I’d decided to blow myself up instead.

Seven or eight more mantaurs circled the corner and stopped to face us.

But now I had to use both.

I examined the ogre.

Brother Widespread Tempest. Ogre Basilica Cleric Guard. Level 125.

This NPC worships Taranis.

This NPC is Untouchable. That probably doesn't mean what you think it means. You can still touch him. He's probably gonna try to touch you first, though.

The Basilica Guards are the ogres who guard, you guessed it, the Basilica Entrance of Club Vanquisher on the 12th Floor. They all worship Taranis, and they are one of the few non-deities who have the ability to—at least temporarily—stop a deity from passing a threshold. Their worship of Taranis imparts them the rare and famed *Untouchable* status, meaning gods aren't allowed to attack them.

As a result, these guys are like the tow truck drivers of the Ascendency. Everybody knows they're necessary, and everybody hates them anyway. This has made them very grumpy and honestly, kind of lonely.

You don't want these guys to leave their post on the 12th floor because if they do, odds are good that the bored gods hanging out in the halls may notice that the basilica's entrance is wide open. And if that happens, some of those naughty gods may wander off untethered.

"You die now," the ogre said, pointing at me. On either side of him, the mantaurs unleashed their hand claws.

"Okay, Kandy is it?" I asked the sluggalette, stepping back as I wiped another screaming worm away. I still couldn't bend my knees, which really, really sucked. The worms didn't seem to hurt or attack me, but it wasn't pleasant, either. At least the slugpox had stopped again. "Stay with me. Kill anyone who gets in my way. I have some friends we're meeting halfway. Don't hurt them. But I want you to sink a hatchet into anyone else. Things are about to get loud."

"Call me Bigs," the sluggalette said. She swung her head hatchet which flecked naga blood everywhere. "Is this ogre dude our friend or is he getting kneecapped?"

"He's not our friend," I said as I took the *Black Nimbus* potion and hurled it at the ogre. Before it even reached him, I dropped the two alarm traps and let them roll off into opposite directions. The potion splattered against the ogre's chest as the announcement rang out.

This song didn't chart in the Billboard Hot 100, but it did top off at number 10 in October of 1990 in the Finnish charts, and that's good enough for me! It's "Holy Wars... The Punishment Due."

I wasn't familiar with this song, which was by the band Megadeth, but Louis had insisted it would be the perfect tune to force berserk status onto the mantaurs. Once the first few bars of the heavy metal riff echoed, I knew he was correct.

The white ball of flames in the ogre's hand whiffed out as the crackling black halo formed around his head. The "Un" part of the "Untouchable" status over his head faded away. Multiple symbols appeared over his head and started to circle one another. They were marked for death symbols by gods... and there were a lot of them.

I could no longer hear, but the "Oh, fuck" forming on the ogre's lips was unmistakable.

Warning: A Mantaur Mosh Pit is about to form.

I didn't know what, exactly, that meant. I didn't want to find out. The ogre turned, and he ran. Three of the mantaurs screamed and followed him. A moment later, some god vine thing rushed past, followed by the same cheetah I'd seen earlier.

Katia: They're moving from the hallway!

If Diwata was in that mass of vines, I didn't wait to find out. I was still marked for death by them, and the moment I was noticed, they would come after me.

The remaining mantaurs, now glowing, shouted and charged at us. I pulled two more *Black Nimbus* potions as I activated the skill I'd received from Li Na.

Profane Iron.

I felt my own skin tear as dozens of chains ripped from my flesh. I took a tiny bit of a hit to my own health. Two of the chains reached down and plucked the potions from my hands. Each one shot out in a different direction and smashed into a different mantaur, simultaneously knocking the creatures over and inflicting them with Black Nimbus. A third chain wrapped around the neck of another, and a fourth tripped two more. Two more struck, scorpion-like at the closest, piercing directly into the guard's flesh at his clavicles. He screamed and blindly swung as hot, red blood sprayed over me, Samantha, and Bigs. The mantaur's still-screaming head, along with part of a spinal column was ripped from his body and discarded.

The mantaurs, confused and blinded by their berserking status, lashed out at their two comrades with the nimbus status while my prehensile

chains stabbed and choked the others, cutting, ripping, and whipping at astonishing speed.

The fight was over in seconds, which was good because the skill didn't last long. Li Na had several chain spells and skills, and this was different from her regular ones. This was a once-a-day, multiple chains at once skill. I could only do it for about thirty seconds. She said she could now do it for about a minute and a half. I could only truly control two of the chains. She could control ten. She used it to attack multiple enemies at once, but it was actually designed as a defensive skill, like a type of shield.

More mantaurs rushed by, ignoring the slaughter here and moving in the same direction the ogre had gone. Samantha was circling my head, screaming something. Victory stood there, her hands on her ears.

I didn't hesitate. The line of guilds was just around the corner. I ran. Sort of. I stiff-legged myself in that direction, almost tripping over rapidly-dying vines. A second ogre appeared, and I hit him with the same potion. He, too, ran away.

I turned the corner just as the four others—Katia, Prepotente, Li Jun, and Zhang—rounded the corner at the other end of the hall. Bianca was also out and roaring. So was Annie, Katia's totem. The skull-headed bird was covered in blood and disappeared in a puff of smoke. A strange, sap-like substance dripped from the ceiling. The walls shook. There was an announcement, but I couldn't hear it.

There was no map-making guild on my map, but Prepotente moved to a wall panel, pressed against it, and pushed. The hidden door appeared, and we all rushed the door.

You have discovered two hidden guilds. You have discovered the Map-Making Guild! You have discovered the Calligrapher's Guild!

Entering the Calligrapher's Guild.

We all pushed inside as Prepotente slid the door behind him closed.

"Again?" a voice asked. "*Again?*"

"Bianca," Prepotente called as he pulled the bloody goat dragon into a pet carrier. "Mind the papers."

"I'm alive," Zhang said. He looked up at the ceiling, shaking his fist. "Fuck you! I'm alive! I'm alive!"

"Who am I killing?" Bigs asked, waving her head axe around.

But I barely registered this as I stared at the half frog, half bat creature. The guildmaster met my gaze. My heart stopped the moment I saw the

name hovering over her head. My eyes moved to the wings of the creature. She'd written extensively about the differences between the wings of her chosen race, the Xenopus, and those of her birth race, the Vesper.

"Milk?" I asked.

And even though she didn't know who I was before this, in that moment, she did. I could see it. I could feel it. This was my sister, and I was her brother, and we now both knew it.

"Carl, are you okay?" It was Katia.

And up until that moment, I'd been holding it all back. Those moments when I wasn't there and I wasn't here. Those horrific seconds as I'd reformed. It was like all the pain anyone had ever felt, all shoved into a single moment. I had borne it because what other choice did I have? Everything was moving so fast. Everything was *still* moving fast.

But in that moment as I realized the creature standing before me was the author of the sixth edition of the cookbook, my sister, and that she'd been here the whole time, something inside of me ... changed.

I didn't break. No. I wasn't broken. I will not be broken.

"Milk," I whispered a second time. This time, it wasn't a question.

"Child, come here," the strange creature said, wrapping me in leathery wings. She held on me as I pretended like I wasn't, finally, sobbing.

"It's not over yet," I managed to whisper. "Not even close."

"I know. Don't you worry. It's okay," she said, stroking me with her wings. I knew all around me, the others were watching this, absolutely bewildered. We weren't safe yet. Still, I didn't care. I wrapped my arms around this stranger, and I didn't want to ever let go.

"Let it out," she whispered. "It's okay. It's okay."

And I did. I rested, just for a moment. I pulled off that heavy, heavy mask, just for a moment.

Donut messaged me as I remained wrapped in the woman's embrace.

Donut: ARE YOU OUT OF THERE YET? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Carl: We're almost out.

Donut: ARE YOU OKAY? NOTHING HAPPENED HERE. WE DIDN'T HAVE TO USE ONE OF JUICE BOX'S DIGGERS AFTER ALL. IT WAS EASIER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE.

Carl: It was easy here, too. Went off without a hitch.

Donut: I'M SO GLAD.

Carl: See you soon, Donut.

<Note Added By Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

I know you're dead, Drakea, but I haven't forgotten how much you hated the naga. If there is a veil, like I know you believed, I hope you watched that from the other side. I'm not sure what the implications of today are for the naga as a people, but I did what I could. I know it's not enough, not yet, but I hope you would be proud of what happened today. I'm doing my best, but goddamn. Goddamn. It's getting harder every day to keep myself from drowning.

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[PART 3]
OPEN HOSTILITIES

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JUSTICE LIGHT

“Leave,” Justice Light said to Sneaky Tyler C, the lead sluggalo. “You have done good work, but it is time for you to join the others above the surface. You don’t want to be down here for this final part.”

The slug had just tied off a manual tripwire with his mouth. He looked up, surprised. All around, the other slugs paused their work.

“Yo, whatchu talkin’ about? We’re a team.”

Justice leaned down in the dark tunnel so he was beak-to-face with the slug. In these past days, he’d grown fond of the strange creatures. He’d held several incorrect assumptions regarding them. He’d told Carl and Tipid that he wanted them to help build the trap system because it was dangerous, and these creatures didn’t appear to care if they died. That was only partially true. It was also only part of the reason he’d insisted on using them as his assistants.

It turned out he was incorrect about his second assumption regarding these creatures as well.

But that was okay. That was something he’d learned long ago. Wishing for favorable air currents does not manifest them. You ride the currents you have, or you don’t fly. It was as simple as that.

With his lone wing, he patted the fat, painted slug on the side of his squishy neck. “Warlord Carl and Donut are doing such a great job, If you stay down here, you might end up not getting to fight at all. They need as many soldiers as they can, and you and the others will miss out. If the plan succeeds, all of this work won’t be necessary, and you won’t see any action at all. I know you want to fight. Go find Colonel Tipid and tell him you’re trained sappers, and maybe you can join up with the Frothing Tunnel

Moles. They're sure to be busy in the coming hours. Operation Ruin will start the moment the timer ends."

"Ugh. That sounds epic, but it's not *here*. I want to do the chop-chop in my hood. Know what I'm saying?"

Justice chuckled. He had to take a moment to decipher the slug's words. It was one of the things he enjoyed about the small creatures. It was like having a never-ending supply of puzzles to solve. Justice Light loved puzzles. So had his children.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "If it goes bad, and you have to retreat, I want the whole squad to come back down here for the final defense. That way you won't miss it if something happens."

The slug whooped loudly, and turned. "You heard 'im, boys. And Worgo, you too. We going to war!"

Without another protest, they all started sliming and shouting their way toward the surface.

"Not that hallway," Justice called. "You'll set off the proximity scythe! Remember what happened to Lickity Spit!"

"Oh, fuck. My bad," Tyler C called as he veered toward the correct hall.

"Not you," Justice said to Sick-Ass Worgo, the level 53 slug at the end of the line.

The sluggalette paused. She seemed to hesitate.

"Yo, bossman. Whatcha need?" Worgo asked as the last slug slithered away.

Justice examined the creature. This one had a metallic club—called a "baseball bat"—dangling from the side of her neck. It dragged wherever she went. Her fine touch with her mouth had been instrumental in setting the manual tripwires from the eastern approach. She'd been one of the hardest, most focused workers on the squad.

"Tell her we need to talk," Justice said, taking a step back. With his one, good wing, he gently touched the wall, activating the hidden traps in the room. The extra ones he'd planted himself.

"Yo, what you on?" Worgo asked.

"Your real boss," Justice repeated. "Juice Box. Tell her we need to talk."

The slug seemed to think on this for a moment. "Damn, man," the slug finally said, sighing. "I'm supposed to kill you if you figure it out."

"I assumed as much. At this moment, there are three traps between you and myself that I have secretly placed. You might get to me, no matter what

form you take. You *might*. But you won't stop the message I have prepared for Carl and the others. I'd like to avoid that, and I suspect your boss would like to avoid that as well."

"I actually count six traps," Sick-Ass Worgo said after a moment. She sighed again. "I'm going to change form so we can talk. Don't skewer me."

Justice was impressed. It was actually eight traps, but some of them were very well hidden. Had the changeling actually seen them, or was it a guess?

He'd known from the beginning not to trust the NPC team. He'd brought it up with both Tipid and Rosetta. Tipid, in his enthusiastic naivety, had thought the risk would be negligible. Rosetta was a bit more realistic in her assessment of the threat. Carl didn't have the proper point of reference and had no idea what he was dealing with. That was the problem with most revolutionaries. They had tunnel vision.

Not that you're any different, he told himself. Was it still tunnel vision if he was aware of it?

Justice Light had chosen the sluggalos to help him because he'd incorrectly assumed that the procedurally generated NPCs wouldn't be copy-able by the class A and B NPC changelings.

He'd obviously been wrong.

But, luckily, paranoia had been Justice's way of life for a very long time now. He kept careful, careful track of everyone around him at all times. He even knew when the change had occurred. When Worgo—the real Worgo—had gone down the new tunnel and had returned just a few minutes later, Justice had noticed the change immediately. His built-in neural implants had noted the subtle change of body temperature and weight. Also, the lack of hormonal emissions had been a dead giveaway.

The fact that these changelings could mimic the slugs at all was alarming on several levels. His working theory was that these particular changelings had their gating removed because of that quest on the fifth floor with the Quetzalcoatlus ghost. That whole setup never came to pass, but the system would have allowed them to add the demi-god into their library should they have survived an encounter with the ghost. As a result, all the changelings that the crawlers sent down here to the ninth could now mimic just about anything they managed to touch, which was terrifying, especially with them gaining memories of their past iterations.

The slugs were procedurally generated, which made them throwaway one-offs. They were barely a step above the NPCs they used to populate the clubs. Mimicking them didn't sound like it was a big deal, but it had never been allowed before. The slugs were a different classification in the programming. And if Justice Light knew one thing about this damn game, it was that if one door was unexpectedly unlocked, it was possible—even likely—that other doors would be unlocked as well.

This realization had changed everything for Justice Light. His impossible plan, which was really just an overly complicated suicide plot, was suddenly not so impossible. But first, he had to get the changelings on his side.

Worgo the slug transformed into a humanoid, blank form, crouching so she wouldn't trigger the dart needles above him. This was a bigger changeling, meaning she was likely old and powerful. Her name in the system changed from Sick-Ass Worgo to Jessica. The head on the creature changed, leaving the rest of the body the same, which was something *else* only the most powerful changelings could do.

The head became that of Juice Box herself, in human form.

"Well, well, well, aren't you smart for an outworlder," she said as she looked up at Justice Light.

Justice felt his feathers around his neck ruffle. "Am I really talking to you?"

His seismic monitor suggested a slight uptick in activity underneath him. He took another step back. "And I take offense to the title. I am of the White Cliffs, and I never asked to be taken from my original home. I am no outworlder. Not by choice. If anything, I am just as much a child of the dungeon as you are. I was reborn here much in the same way you've been reborn. How many times has it been? One hundred?"

"Yes, you are really talking to me," Juice Box said. "I'm using the chat system to talk to my helper, and he's helpfully using my image to relay the message. So if your plan is to kill me, I am out of reach." She paused. "I do apologize for calling you that, though your estimates on *my* age ain't even close. I've been writing down my memories as they come, and I believe I have lived at least 400 different lives up until this point."

Justice Light sighed. Four hundred lives? He believed it. NPCs were supposed to be recycled after 20, but the showrunners insisted that

expensive, deeper-level audits weren't necessary since the Class A and Class B NPCs got auto-recycled when they were killed.

His seismic meter continued to warn of movement below. The eagle held out his one, good wing. "Please, call off your digger. I'll make a deal with you. If you don't wreck everything I spent the last week building, I promise I won't tell the others of this conversation, no matter how it goes. I believe you have no desire to be our enemy and all you want is to protect yourselves. I truly believe that, but if you use the digger to get to me, you will hurt your allies and ultimately yourself. All I ask is that you hear me out."

Juice Box cocked her head to the side. The digger below stopped moving. Justice Light took that as assent.

"Good. Good. Thank you."

"I am a very busy girl, skyfowl. You wanted to talk? You have five minutes. I'm listening."

Justice bowed slightly and then without further preamble, he started to speak.

"I killed an NPC once, out of anger. It was a very long time ago. Most people don't understand why I care so much about this one incident when I would eventually go on to kill thousands of mobs and NPCs alike over the course of my crawl." He paused, emotion caught in his throat.

"This one. He was one of those lizard creatures. The ones that smell funny and have a strange, talkative way about themselves, always saying what's on their mind. Can change their gender at will based on their environment? I can't recall the name of the species at the moment, but one such creature had cheated me earlier, and I was already on edge. And this one insulted me. He didn't even mean anything by it. It's just their way. But my people. We are proud..."

Justice Light trailed off, remembering.

"He was the proprietor of the only trap store on the entire level. I snapped, and I killed him. Because of that, dozens of my fellow crawlers were unable to find the supplies they needed to complete the level, and they died."

Juice Box said nothing.

"I felt horrible about it, about my mistake. But even that wasn't why it affected me so." He held out his single wing and examined it. He rerouted some power in his implant and ratcheted up the sensitivity on his seismic

sensors. He could now sense the enormous digger, just sitting there, idle but with its dwarven engine still on.

“When I got out, I made a deal. I asked for the right to run the trap store. I know, it was a bit silly. It added some time to my indentureship, but, you see, I wanted to make sure the best supplies were always available to the crawlers. Still, it didn’t help. It was already too late.”

“What do you mean?” Juice Box asked.

“I killed that NPC because I allowed the cold to get inside. It is inevitable, yes. How can it not be? But that was the moment I could no longer return to who I once was. In that single, unnecessarily violent act I allowed them to win. Everything after that ceased to matter, or so I thought.”

“This is all very touching, skyfowl. But you forget who I am. I have heard the confessions of a thousand men. If you’re attempting to gain sympathy, I am the wrong audience.”

“I know,” he said. “But, please. I am not finished. Hear me out.”

The blank form crossed its arms. Justice Light continued.

“I’m not sure how much you know about what happens to crawlers after they’re finished with the dungeon, but I became an indentured servant. I spent the next several hundred cycles working as a merchant. When I first arrived, my next door neighbor was someone named Dante. A crocodilian. I didn’t know it at the time, but he and I had a lot in common. A similar burning distaste for the position we found ourselves in.” Justice let out a soft caw. “One season, they told us we could no longer be merchants, and we were to be NPCs. Castle guards. Our job was to simply stand outside this ice castle and guard it. They told us we weren’t supposed to stop crawlers from entering. It was a settlement. Just another town. We were to just keep the peace, so Dante and I hoped and prayed it would be a simple assignment.”

“Still not following.”

“Please. I’m almost there. At the end of the floor, we ended up not seeing a single crawler, and Damien told us we would be able to go back to our regular assignments. But first, we had to do one last thing. The castle was filled with NPC servants. Ice elves, if you’ve ever seen them. More fairy than anything. They are as tall as your human form, but I can fit my entire talon around their waists. They are gentle, simple creatures. Innocent. Not like regular high elves. Over the weeks we spent watching the castle,

they became our friends. I knew all their names. They would play in the snow, like children. This was all off camera, and I still don't understand why they asked us to do it. They loved puzzles." He paused, remembering what came next. Dreading the telling of it. "All this time later, and I still don't understand why they ordered us to kill them all."

Juice Box suddenly changed form to an ice elf, and Justice Light felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest. He caught the cry in his throat. He physically took a step back, and he had to quickly hit a hidden panel on the wall to stop yet another trap from activating.

The changeling spoke, but her voice changed. This was not Juice Box. This was now Jessica, the changeling who'd been pretending to be Worgo. "Juice Box does not have these creatures in her library, but I do. I lived amongst them many lifetimes ago. They are indeed simple, gentle creatures."

All Justice Light could do was nod. After a moment, the Juice Box head returned. Justice took a moment to compose himself.

"My friend, Dante. He refused. He looked up into the air and said he wasn't going to do it. They ordered us a second time. Again, he refused. There was no third warning. A beam came from the sky, and he was just gone. Just like that. He'd worked so long, so hard, and he was almost free. The light simply erased him, as if he'd never existed."

Juice Box cocked her head, not saying anything.

"He'd already passed the point of no return, or so I thought. But in the end, I was wrong. He stood his ground, and he died. And by the gods, he died free." Justice Light filled with pride for his friend, his brother. "Execution by the AI, which is actually quite rare, believe it or not. Usually they send in a mercenary squad for folks like us. Same as those we're fighting outside right now."

"They used to call them hardshells," Juice Box said.

Justice Light nodded. "I've heard that term before. They're usually gnolls, but not always. Hired mercenaries to do the dirty work when the cameras are turned away. Can't have the AI do too much of the clean-up. They like to keep it focused on the crawlers, lest it go primal early."

And what about you?" Juice Box finally asked. "What happened to you after your friend was killed?" There was a new gentleness there.

Justice held out the stump of his wing. "I, too, refused. But I only did so once, and unlike Dante, I was given a warning. They ordered me a second

time.” He lowered his head. The beam of light that had removed his wing had been so fast, there wasn’t even pain. But what happened next... “I am still not free.”

In the telling of this story, Justice usually ended it right there. But this time, he finally voiced what happened next. He’d never told anyone the specifics. Not even Porthus. But this was important.

“Sometimes, I have this dream. In this dream, I go into the castle to find the ice elves all dead. They’d overheard what was happening outside with me and Dante, and, in their kindness, they killed themselves to protect me—their friend—from having to do it myself. That is my dream, but that is not what happened. Even that would’ve been the coward’s solution, so why do I yearn for it? And after I have this dream, I always go back to that moment with the clerk at the trap store. The first person I killed out of anger, and I wonder, what difference is there between anger and cowardice?”

“Why did they ask this of you in the first place? Why kill them?”

“This is not uncommon, but I still do not know the reason. But I did it. Dante died. I lost my wing. And I did what they asked because I was afraid.”

Skyfowl were proud, and they did not weep.

But what happened when one lost himself? Justice Light had no pride left, and he did not feel worthy of the title Skyfowl.

“They didn’t even fight back. They loved puzzles and the snow. I was already done. It was all off camera. I still don’t understand why.” He barely got the words out.

Over the course of this story, Justice started hunching in on himself, shrinking. Now he stood straight. “But Dante taught me that there is no such thing as the point of no return. So I want you to know this, Juice Box, leader of Team Retribution. You are distrustful of us former crawlers. I understand that. You fear we crawlers will sacrifice you to save ourselves, and you have positioned yourselves to protect against that.”

Juice Box sighed. “I’m not sure if this story is as helpful as you think it is.”

“But,” he said, holding up his good wing. “I now understand what you’re *really* doing, what your real plan is, and I want you to know I can help you. I, too, have a plan, and I believe it is compatible with your own. We can do this together. I have a new dream, and I am no longer afraid. I

am still angry, yes, but it is a different type of anger. It is focused, purposeful, and together we can both achieve our mutual goals.”

Juice Box raised an eyebrow. “What we’re *really* doing? Oh, I can’t wait to hear this.”

“You have spies in all corners of our base, correct? And not just our base, but all of the bases.”

Juice Box didn’t answer.

“It’s okay,” Justice Light said. “I know who many of them are, at least in our base. But you know what I couldn’t figure out, at least at first? The Blood Sultanate. Their security certainly wasn’t as good as the Madness, yet you managed to infiltrate the Viceroy headquarters over and over before the ceasefire. I believe you decapitated multiple Viceroys in the days leading up to the ceasefire. Yet, you claimed you were unable to reach the Sultanate, an obvious lie.”

“What’s your point?” Juice Box asked.

“Someone, and I’m guessing that human, Louis, told you all the way back on the fifth floor the details on what Carl and Donut need to do to defeat the naga, and why it is so important. You’ve been pretending to not be able to get to the Sultanate because at first you were keeping your options open.”

“Why would I do that? I owe Carl. Despite your accusations, we are allies. I understand he had a difficult time with the assassination of the naga whore. If he had died, and we could’ve prevented it, it would’ve destroyed our alliance.”

“I believe that you’re a good person, Juice Box. I believe you intend on honoring the alliance, but I also believe the alliance is secondary to your true purpose, which will always come first. You could’ve killed the Sultana and her entire court quite easily. Hell, I believe you could end all this right now. I am quite certain of this. You are poised and in position to kill every leader at any moment.”

Below, the engine on the digger ticked off from idle. It still wasn’t moving, but the machine was ready to surge upward.

Juice Box didn’t appear to show any emotion, but she stood straighter than before. “If that is true, then why wouldn’t we have done that by now?”

Justice Light reached over, hit a few buttons and deactivated all the traps between himself and the changeling. He stepped forward and leaned in.

“The gods. It’s all about the gods. It has been about them the whole time. You’re risking it all so you and your kind can physically touch as many of them as possible.”

Juice Box was silent for a long moment. “Tell me something, Mr. Skyfowl. Assuming this little theory of yours is correct, where does that leave us? What was your purpose in calling me here?”

Justice Light suppressed a chuckle. “Well, that’s easy. I told you my backstory because I need you to believe and to understand how committed I am to what I’m about to tell you. But first, let me ask you something. I’m not sure what you did in Club Vanquisher just now to cause all those gods to appear, but I’m guessing it didn’t go well for you guys?”

The changeling frowned. She seemed to come to a decision. “We lost three. We did not cause the gods to appear, but we were in position just in case. One of us managed to touch Bast—the panther god—but she died before she could escape. At this point, only one of us has touched a deity, and that one is... wrong.”

Justice nodded. He held his breath. “What about the ogres that appeared up from below? The basilica guards? Did your people touch any of them?”

“Three of us did.”

Justice left out a small caw. “What if I could show you how to touch a god and not get killed? And in exchange, you agree to honor all of our previous deals. No more of this subterfuge. You agree to help with Operation Ruin and not sabotage it. You help us win this war as quickly as possible.”

“If Operation Ruin goes off like you want, the gods won’t be an issue. This will be over before any more appear.”

Justice Light finally did chuckle. “Oh, my dear. You are thinking much too small. That’s not the war I’m talking about.”

He sat down and started to explain to her what he’d truly been building down here. He showed her the trap he’d started designing the very moment he watched Carl discover the Gate of the Feral Gods.

Far below, before he even finished relating his plan, the digger engine kicked fully on, but the machine started to move away. He sighed with relief.

You ride the currents you have, or you don’t fly.

Class: Trap Master

Race: Skyfowl.
Birth Race: Skyfowl.
Top Level: 86

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor.
After a tumultuous and ultimately tragic tenure as a merchant selling trap supplies, was released into the wide universe where he spent every waking moment learning about dungeon lore, hidden trap exploits, gods, and the Ascendancy of the 12th floor. Eventually returned to the dungeon to assist the Princess Posse and to implement his great plan.

Author of the eighth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Alive.

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REMAINING TEAMS

The Bone Clan in Spots 1 and 2 -*Unaffiliated*

The Princess Posse in Spots 3 and 4 - *The Good Guys Alliance*

The Dream in Spots 5 and 6 -*Unaffiliated*

The Madness in Spots 7 and 8 -*The Bloc*

The Reavers in Spot 9 - *The Bloc*

Team Retribution defending Larracos. -*The Good Guys Alliance*

Eliminated:

The Democratic Sortion

The Prism Kingdom

The Operatic Collective

The Blood Sultanate

Time until Phase Three: Two Hours.

After the battle that temporarily shut down Club Vanquisher and eliminated The Blood Sultanate, the battlefields went quiet for a few days. Everyone spent the time licking their wounds, rebuilding, and waiting for the true horrors to begin.

We did have a few minor skirmishes. The Dream set up additional artillery on their border with the former Blood Sultanate and started lobbing rocks at us as we prepped for the coming fights. I led a quick raid to wreck their trebuchets, and Rend managed to make his first few solo kills, including a very unfortunate incident with a zebra mount that was much too big for him to swallow whole, despite his very eager attempts.

But other than that, we'd gone into a wait-and-see-what-happens-next mode.

At least that's how it looked for the cameras. While we outwardly prepared our defenses, we worked tirelessly in secret, prepping for what we prayed would be the biggest, fastest, and—hopefully—final major offensive of Faction Wars.

We called it “Operation Ruin,” and it would kick off the moment the Open Hostilities phase began.

We now held three fronts. Florin's 101st Crocodiles occupied sector two, formerly of the Operatics, but now owned by the orcs. We moved our front line north to the hilly border with the Skull Empire, whose castle sat nestled in the only mountainous region of the battlefield. The border here was designated by the region's only river, which flowed directly into Larracos and was the source of the cascading waterfall into the city's depths. The orcs maintained a garrison on the opposite side of the river, but it was clearly just a small, defensive force. The bulk of their troops were at their stronghold.

Even though we now owned sector four, formerly of the Blood Sultanate, we maintained our southern front lines at the existing trenches between sectors three and four. This was defended by Tran's 102nd Bulwark battalion.

We did this because once the Ramp-Up phase expired, the borders stopped having any real meaning, and the enemy could advance from anywhere. It was impossible to guard the entire length of the border at once. The land of the former Blood Sultanate was nothing but miles and miles of gently rolling hills. We turned this area into a horror show of traps. The majority of the traps likely wouldn't be effective, but we'd know the moment any of them were disabled. We'd be able to easily track any large force as it moved in, and we were far back enough to pivot and meet them.

The third front was now the round border of Shanty Town.

Juice Box, who'd been fairly stingy with her support, seemed to have had a sudden change of heart and was now lending us ground troops to occupy the town. These troops, mostly Semeru dwarves and the regular citizens of Larracos were now mixed in with Li Na's 107th White Dragon Urban Defense battalion, forming an impressive ring around the lip of Larracos. None of our enemies could yet freely enter the city, not until four teams remained, but Shanty Town itself was still vulnerable and would be a prized target.

Now, with two hours left until go time, we were just about done with our final "defensive" tower. The sun was setting against the distant horizon, and it would be pitch dark out here the moment the timer ticked to zero.

The plans for Operation Ruin were set, but the biggest wildcard was the enemy's plans, if any, for the moment the third phase began.

Our biggest, most immediate threat was the orcs. Thankfully, they were currently at odds with the Reavers on their opposite border. I held out hope that those teams would occupy each other, but now that the stakes for them were real, I knew that was unlikely. We had reports of skirmishes between the other groups, especially the Dream and the Madness, but my hunches told me it was all a diversion. I felt it in my bones.

While the Skull Empire was currently on everyone's shit list, they all knew their best escape was to kill all the crawlers. And even though they all hated each other, it didn't make sense to me that they still wouldn't work together to eliminate us as soon as possible.

"Is it too late to paint it a different color? This drab gray isn't really working for me," Donut said as we sat at the base of the Nest tower in Shanty Town. She sat regally upon Mongo while Rend, now about $\frac{3}{4}$'s the size of his former self, sat on the ground next to them, gnawing on the side of a cart containing a pile of the granite blocks.

High, high above, a pair of former crawlers scaled the outside of the tower, rapidly building the top parapet. I could barely see them in the fading light, but Donut glared up at them with her newly added **Perfect Night Vision**. That skill was added thanks to a hat, which she in turn had drained and added to her Tiara of a Thousand Lights. The tiara currently had 35 of 99 skills and upgrades added onto it and would have two more by the time the timer expired. The tiara itself glittered brilliantly like a star upon Donut's head, which I didn't like. She, predictably, loved it.

I turned my attention back to the crawlers finishing the tower. The speed in which they built this was akin to that of a video game. It had still taken almost two full days to build this thing, but out in the real world, this would've been a project that would have taken months with a team of a hundred workers and a whole lot of cranes. As far as skyscrapers were concerned, this wasn't that big, but here, surrounded by the one and two-story hovels, this was, by far, the tallest structure outside of the sunken funnel of Larracos.

Tall enough to give Donut line-of-sight of the entire battlefield when she perched upon the very top.

Toyotomi the rhinoceros, who'd spear-headed the rapid construction of the synergy tower, grunted at Donut, who scowled back at the former guard for the Prism.

"Oh, don't give me that look. All I'm saying is a nice purple would've been a better choice. Gray is just so clinical. Boring. It's not like we're trying to blend into the background. We can't hide it. So we might as well make a statement. And we need flags. All towers should have flags." She gasped. "We should make a new unit patch for just the tower. We can put Mongo on it!"

Mongo screeched with agreement, waving his arms.

"It is already built," Toyotomi said. "It is the color of granite because it is made of granite. If we paint it now, we won't have time for the mages to coat it with their protection spells. Plus, assuming the build as a whole is considered master quality, it will glow gold the moment it is done."

"I still think a nice purple would enhance the effect," Donut grumbled.

I reached forward and put my hand against one of the lower blocks.

Master Quality. This fortification is at 150% Strength.

This edifice is currently under construction.

1/15 Enchantments active.

Current Enchantments:

Increased Strength.

"Only 15 protections?" I asked worriedly. "You said it would be 20."

"I said there will be at least 20 on each block, which is true. Fifteen is the maximum for the individual blocks, but several of the protections we're using bleed to nearby blocks, and we will be creating a net pattern," Toyotomi said. "And as soon as the men up there place the last block and the tower is complete, the bonus will activate and the strength will increase

to 200%. And after that, I will cast *Edifice Shield* which doubles that. With Princess Donut's *Sentry* and *Flak* spells, most incoming fire should get deflected." He indicated one of four, smaller towers nestled amongst the other buildings. "We also have *four* additional deflector towers when we only need one. Those plus the multiple mages you plan on placing in the lower floors will make this the safest place on the battlefield, even if the entire might of the Skull Empire's war mages target it."

"They *will* target it," I said. "What about the ground? What if they tunnel underneath?"

The large rhino appeared as if he wanted to strangle me. This was the third time I'd asked him a version of this question, and his answer hadn't changed. "As far as we're aware, the Larracos army owns the subterranean passages. But this tower will be so encased in protections, it will float if the ground underneath it disappears. It is more protected than the FUPA itself."

Ahead, a group of newly-arrived mages moved to start the process of protecting the tower's individual pieces. They'd just finished shoring up the FUPA, and they would spend the next two hours painstakingly moving up the tower, creating a lattice pattern of protection spells on each individual block. Nearby, I had two more crawlers, members of Elle's team, carefully watching them, making certain the mages weren't spies or worm heads.

A new cart pulled up, and the large form of the driver, Jorgen, lumbered out, his muscles bulging as he placed another granite block on the ground. "This should be the last of them," he said. He looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Heidi. We are now on our way to the front." He looked at me and shook his head. "She is always nagging, but we can't choose who we love." He shrugged and jumped back in the cart.

Donut watched it rumble away. "Carl, have you noticed that Jorgen guy is always talking about this Heidi person, but she's not really there?"

I didn't answer. I was distracted. *Everything* depended on this tower. But what was worse was that there was no way to hide our intentions now that it was built. Everyone could see it from any part of the battlefield. Every long-range spell and weapon would be pointed directly at it.

That, of course, was the point. Still, I did not like the fact Donut would be sitting, open-air, at the very top of this thing when it all started. Especially since she wore a glittering, here's-where-my-head-is tiara.

It filled me with an incredible amount of anxiety even though this had all been my idea. I kept thinking of new levels of protection we could throw

on there. “We need to remember to get a second set of teleport traps she can keep in her inventory in case they manage to disable the ones in her escape hatch.”

Donut jumped to my shoulder and headbutted me. “I’ll be fine, Carl.” She raised her voice. “Especially if the tower is painted purple.”

“Don’t distract Toyotomi,” I said. “He needs to concentrate on this last part.”

“Me?” Donut asked. “I’m just asking about the color. You’re the one who keeps asking him the same questions over and over.”

“You’re both distracting him,” Katia said, walking up to stand by us. She patted Mongo on the head, pulled out a piece of bacon she’d saved from her food box, and tossed it in the air. He squeaked with joy and snapped it away.

Rend saw this and immediately turned from the cart he was slobbering all over and started whining like an untrained dog. Katia produced a second piece of bacon. “I’m only going to give this to you if you promise to not try to eat my hand off like last time.”

Rend started to vigorously giggle as Donut scoffed.

“You shouldn’t spoil him like that,” Donut said, eyeing Rend. “He’s big enough now to eat more than your hand.”

Katia tossed the bacon in the air, but Mongo, quick as a whip, snatched it before Rend could grab it.

To my surprise, it was Donut who corrected the dinosaur. “Mongo! Bad!” Donut scolded. “We don’t steal!”

Mongo squealed in protest as Rend sat heavily on the ground, his little elephant legs splaying out in front of him. Tears started to form in his massive, bulbous eyes. Katia laughed and produced a third piece of bacon and balled it in her fist, presenting it to Rend, whose massive tongue snaked out and started slobbering all over her hand. She opened it, and he gently slurped it away.

“Disgusting,” Donut said as Mongo whined at Katia for a third piece.

I smiled at seeing Donut and Katia together, but my chest ached, too. If the next few hours went well, this was it. If we finished off the enemy, we weren’t going to wait any longer. The moment we were done, Katia was going to sit down in the stronghold and eat the Orchid of Eileithyia's Grace.

The moment Katia ate it, she would basically fall into a coma for an hour. Assuming she survived this part, one of three things would happen

next.

Per our deal with Huanxin Jinx, what was supposed to happen was that Katia would be whisked away to the 12th floor where she would become a celestial attendant. If this happened, then all the requirements of the Sepsis Whore deal would be met, and Donut would be allowed to leave the ninth floor.

If the alien didn't honor the deal, then Katia would either be made pregnant and kicked out of the dungeon, or she would have her still-formidable constitution massively enhanced.

I knew the pregnancy prize was not what Katia wanted. Not anymore. But a part of me thought that would be better. She'd be literally kicked out of the dungeon like the Popov brothers. She would be free.

Supposedly the celestial attendants and other mortal NPCs were protected from the gods on the 12th floor. They literally had saferoom rules upon them, at least until the Ascendency officially started. But I still didn't trust that choice.

I didn't want to think about the third option, which would mean only one of them, Donut or Katia, would be able to go down the stairs. And in fact, it was more insidious than that. Neither of them would be able to go down the stairs as long as the other was still alive. I refused to even entertain the thought.

Katia grabbed a strand of my hair and raised an eyebrow. "I see we're not tying our hair back any more."

"I've gotten used to it," I said. "Besides, with my new hairbrush, it's easier to keep it out."

She laughed. She, too, had received a celestial box from the fight in Club Vanquisher.

Nearby, Baroness Victory and Drick—the adjutant for Team Retribution—stood together, side-by-side, talking into the open air. They were doing a live update of our progress for the viewers. They had a privacy bubble around them, and we couldn't hear what they were saying. Louis stood there awkwardly, waiting to be called into the bubble.

Apparently, Victory was supposed to have been doing these live updates, but it was something she clearly hated, and "they" were leaning on her to do more. I'm still not sure who "they" were since it was clear the AI had completely taken over everything. Either way, her updating

responsibilities included interviewing individual members of the army, and poor Louis had been tasked for today's interview.

Dong Quixote, Splash Zone, Bucket Boy, Doctor Bones, and a group of flesh golems approached. Bomo and the Sledge were with them as well.

"Did you find them?" Donut asked.

Dong shook his head. They were just in the Desperado Club, looking for some sign of the two missing strippers, Anaconda and Damascus Steel.

Dong had Spunky Jefferson, his crust sock flail, dangling over his shoulder. He liked to keep the nickel end of the stinking sock near his ear, even though I was pretty sure the thing was talking to him in his mind. "The new concierge says he hasn't seen them at all. Clarabelle says she hasn't seen them, either. Are you certain you saw him? Because Mr. Jefferson says that in high-stress environments..."

"Yes, I saw him," Donut snapped. "He's in there somewhere. He didn't disappear. And you will not be having discussions about me with your disgusting sock. It makes me very uncomfortable."

"He said you would say that."

"The Penis Parade has re-opened," Splash Zone said, interrupting before Donut could snap back. He did not sound happy. "All new dancers. Same with Bitches, and we don't know where the old ones went. When this is over, I need to go back in there and keep looking for them. The whole crew at Bitches, including Snail Trail and Grandma Sticky are missing."

I'd forgotten that Splash Zone was married, and that his wife was a dancer. I sighed.

Donut jumped to the shoulder of the Sledge, who reached up and gave her a gentle pat.

I regarded the two cretin rock creatures. They would be going up into the tower with Donut. "Both of you need to keep her safe."

Bomo grunted.

"What does it look like I'm made of? Pudding?" Sledge asked.

Both of the cretins wouldn't stop saying weird shit like that, but I took that as an affirmative.

Across the way, Louis was now in the privacy bubble, talking with the two adjutants. I felt guilty when I looked at him, too. His part in all of this was especially dangerous.

"Have you talked to Prepotente?" Katia asked.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s with Rosetta and Mordecai, and they’re ‘interrogating’ the prisoner.”

We’d tried multiple times to talk Milk into coming with us, especially since the club was certainly about to be closed for an extended period, but she refused. We tried to hire her, but the system wouldn’t allow it. I’d sent a quick message to Rosetta, and she point-blank told us to kidnap her. To tie her up and take her with us. We wouldn’t be able to keep her in a saferoom, and we couldn’t let her out of our sight, but apparently, kidnapping and “torturing” guildmasters for their information was not only allowed, but encouraged. She was being held in the FUPA.

Katia paused. I could tell she wanted to ask more about my relationship with Milk. That reaction I’d had, basically throwing myself into Milk’s arms, was clearly on her mind. Prepotente hadn’t even seemed to blink at it. But Katia, Li Jun, and Zhang had all clearly wanted to talk about it. But they were all smart enough not to say anything.

Baroness Victory: Apologies, but Zev is saying Louis isn’t hitting the right numbers and you and Katia are now required to be interviewed. Now.

Carl: Fuck off. I’m busy.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT ME?

Zev: Sorry guys. I know you’re busy. Donut, depending on what happens today, we’ll get you tomorrow by yourself if Li Na goes as we expect. Carl, the AI is demanding we do this. It’ll be two minutes. Don’t be difficult.

“Come on,” Katia said, tugging on my arm as Louis, looking frazzled, exited the privacy bubble.

I put my hand on Louis’s shoulder. “Get to Area 52 and make sure everything is properly loaded. If I don’t see you, be safe. Keep in contact with Donut to coordinate. Low and fast. In and out.”

“Dude,” Louis said. He seemed a little out of breath. “They just showed me a video of me and Juice Box together. I was having her do Erza and, man. It’s great when you’re doing it, but watching it back is something else. I’m a little freaked out right now.”

“Louis, focus.”

He looked at me, tears in his eyes. Clearly there was more to it than them just showing him a sex video.

I paused and exchanged a look with Katia, who looked equally concerned. Now was not the time for him to be having a breakdown. I didn't want to be dismissive, but so much was going on at this moment, I didn't have the time to deal with it. Still, we needed Louis's head to be clear.

"Look, man," I said. "Change of plans. Just hang out for a second, and we'll talk, okay?"

He straightened. "No, no, you're right. I gotta get to work. I'll see you guys."

Carl: Imani, Donut. Louis is having some sort of crisis. Please talk to him. Katia and I gotta do an interview really fast.

We entered the bubble, coming to stand between Victory and Drick, and all thoughts of Louis immediately fled. Drick swayed where he was standing. He smelled like he'd been spending a little too much time with Ferdinand at the bar, which I found kind of interesting, since he was a Valtay worm.

The moment we entered the bubble, a window materialized floating in front of us, and Kevin, the orange announcer of the show appeared.

"We are now joined by Carl and Katia," Kevin said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "Yesterday we talked to Li Jun about his celestial tier robotic eye and Zhang's new cape with the target on the back. Victory and Drick, tell us what you think about the two celestial tier items Carl and Katia received."

Drick grunted, his voice only slightly touched by the inebriation. "Katia's knee pads are a bit of a waste, considering that she's planning on leaving the dungeon—one way or another—pretty soon. This was clearly awarded to her in hopes that she'll give them to Carl to replace his existing knee pads. They even look similar."

"Can we see the knee pads? Are you wearing them right now?" Kevin asked.

Katia gave me a quick, panicked look, and I reached over and squeezed her hand for reassurance.

"I don't have them equipped," she said. "I left them in the guild. I, uh, didn't know we were getting interviewed. I can go grab them real fast if you want."

Outside the privacy bubble, Rend and Mongo both walked up and their faces pressed against the bubble like it was a shield. Mongo appeared to

shriek in outrage because he was blocked from passing, but I couldn't hear anything outside.

Just past them, the tower completed, and a golden glow appeared around the entirety of the synergy tower. Everyone started to cheer. I couldn't hear that, either. The mages immediately went to work.

"That's okay," Kevin said after a moment, and an image of the knee pads appeared, spinning in midair.

"As you know, a financially devastating *seven* celestial boxes were awarded during the attack on Club Vanquisher," Kevin said. "Five awarded via a Celestial, Who-Let-The-Gods-Out Box to crawlers Li Jun, Zhang, Carl, Prepotente, and Katia, and we will discuss the other two tomorrow when we interview Li Na, who recently just shot up to level 84 and number two on the top ten list, passing Prepotente and landing just behind Carl. The Valtay and the Borant Corporation were in court today, claiming that the AI's recent, uh, takeover should release them of their financial obligations regarding awarded loot and unauthorized betting events. We will have more on that tonight. But in the meantime, let's take a look at the description of Katia's award."

The paragraph appeared, floating in mid-air. The show read it out in the AI's voice.

The Enchanted Spiked Knee pads the Munificent Goddess Kina.

This is a Unique item.

This is a Divine Item.

These are knee pads. They are literally made of the eyelashes of the sea goddess Kina, who is really just a weird, horny—and when I say horny, I am using both versions of that term—sea-urchin-like, bottom feeder of a goddess who is into some *really* weird stuff that makes even *me* blush.

This item imbues the following effects:

Plus 25% Damage Reflect for melee attacks.

The Breathe Underwater benefit.

Level 15 Swim skill.

Level 10 Iron Stomach skill.

Level 10 Eater of the Dead skill.

As a divine item, These knee pads will imbue additional, varying benefits when they are in the presence of divine entities.

I shuddered as the AI read out those last two benefits. The Iron Stomach skill was apparently something new this season because Mordecai had never heard of it. It basically allowed one to consume magical items. The item would be destroyed, and if you ate enough, it would permanently raise your intelligence by one point. At level 10, it was a one-to-one ratio, and it also allowed you to eat cursed items with no ill effects, which was a pretty big deal. Apparently, Prepotente already had this skill.

Still, literally eating most magical items was out of the question. The system made no distinction between a magical ring and a magical jacket. Though for Katia, it wasn't as big of a deal since she could make herself large enough to swallow anything whole. She, before she'd unequipped and given away the knee pads, had managed to gain 20 levels to her intelligence by eating random, throwaway items before it became too much.

Eater of the Dead was the same thing, but it was with corpses, which was even more disgusting. The bodies had to be over a certain mass that decreased with each level, but you had to eat several more than the magical items in order to raise a stat. The skill raised your constitution, strength, and dexterity randomly.

"So, Baroness Victory," Kevin asked. "It's almost unheard of for two separate crawlers to have divine items in the same crawl, especially when they're working together. Will the benefits Carl receives from his divine Scavenger's Daughter patch vary from the benefits Katia receives from these knee pads when they're in the presence of the same deity? And what of Prepotente's saddle on Bianca?"

"That's actually a great question," Victory said, her voice taking on a strange, newscaster-like persona I hadn't heard from her before. It was a bit surprising. "And the answer is, generally, the benefits or debuffs will be identical. But there are some exceptions. Since these kneecaps are from the goddess Kina, Katia's benefits will be significantly more powerful than whatever happens with Carl if she's in the presence of Kina. And the same goes with certain enemies of Kina, not that she has any that I'm aware of. Same goes with Carl, though his patch is associated with the Scavenger, so it's not like we'll ever see that in action."

"Wait," I said, but Kevin's laugh was too loud.

"Certainly not. Certainly not," Kevin said. "But if Katia does end up giving a second divine item to Carl, will the benefit double?"

“No,” Baroness Victory said. “The more powerful of the two benefits will occur. While this hasn’t happened before as far as I’m aware, I do know there are matched sets of armor that are supposedly all divine items, and this was prepared far ahead of time.”

“Very interesting,” Kevin said. “Now, let’s take a look at Carl’s, uh, very different Celestial item, which is now his third, behind the Scavenger’s Daughter patch we were just discussing and the potion that gave him his Gloom Wraith Phase skill.”

The hairbrush appeared floating in the air. I sighed. Unlike Donut’s magical hairbrush, which looked like a regular hairbrush, this one was made of shining gold with a jeweled handle. And every time I pulled it through my hair, it screamed. It screamed like a group of women squealing and cheering at a rock concert. And when I stopped brushing my hair, the brush would shout “Encore! Encore!” for two minutes straight until the voices finally faded away.

The Enchanted Hairbrush of the Beefmaster.

This item may only be used on a male with an average hair length of 25 centimeters or longer.

This item may only be used on a single person, once per day.

Samson. Fabio. Michael Bolton. Jim Morrison. The entire band Stryper. Yanni.

Your history is filled with luscious men whose power resided in their lovely locks. Now, it’s your turn.

If you use this magical hairbrush upon your head for five minutes straight, you will receive the following benefits for the next thirty hours:

The Shining Charisma benefit.

The Speedster benefit.

Plus 25% to your constitution.

Level 10 *Entourage*.

Plus your hair will be shiny and healthy, and it will goddamn glisten.

Shining Charisma was a good benefit, though it wasn’t all that useful on this floor. It basically gave everyone in my party an additional 20% of my charisma. Donut’s already god-like charisma would only be boosted by six points.

Entourage was a spell that Donut already had, though for her, it was a bard skill. It was an illusion spell that mirrored party members, and it would be something good to have.

The 25% boost to constitution was huge. That alone made the brush frustratingly invaluable. It was just like with my boxers. It was now too good to give up. I'd been planning on cutting my hair after the tonic's regrowth effect finally ebbed, but now I would have to keep it long.

The Speedster benefit was also great.

The benefit was similar to Donut's *Twinkle Toes* spell, though instead of casting it on Mongo, it worked on myself. I could already run super-fast thanks to my strength and dexterity, but Speedster basically allowed me to move short distances very, very quickly. I wouldn't be quite like the Flash superhero, but I was still impressively quick. And while I couldn't do it long distance, I could flash across the battlefield in seconds. And best of all, I could combine it with my *Gloom Wraith Phase*, allowing the distance I could travel while phased to be much further.

Mordecai said he'd never seen the Speedster benefit awarded like this before. It was usually something someone could sometimes get when their dexterity naturally reached 100, though even then, it was rare. The crawler Osvaldo, who was not a member of the Princess Posse, supposedly had the benefit.

Kevin started to drone on about the hairbrush. Meanwhile, a group had formed outside the privacy bubble. Samantha, Jamal—with his new legs, and Bigs the sluggalette had all also approached and were all at the edge of the bubble, trying to get in, like they were all drawn toward me.

I watched the silent group of workers outside the bubble, all rushing about, all preparing.

I was reminded of the fifth floor and the bubbles. Of the crawlers in the subterranean level. I'd asked them to do something, and they had died. Each and every one. I was reminded of my thoughts then, on the fifth floor. What gives me the right? What gives me the right to lead so many into what will surely be their deaths?

What was coming... Multiple attacks from all fronts, all at once. We were going to attack from above, from below, from the land, and from within. All at once. We were going to sweep across the entire battlefield, and we were going to slaughter them all.

But at what cost? Our victory in Club Vanquisher had given us a sense of hope. A false sense of invulnerability. Even our best case scenarios predicted heavy losses.

Across the way, Donut entered the Nest for the first time, still riding on the shoulder of the Sledge.

All of it was going to depend on her. Even if we were successful—especially if we were successful—I feared the toll on her most of all.

It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

When I'd said that, this was what I'd been talking about. This moment that was coming in one hour and forty-five minutes.

What gives me the right?

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I MET UP WITH LI JUN AND ZHANG AS WE WALKED TOWARD THE SAFEROOM entrance. But first, we had to make a detour. We silently angled through the dark toward the small, newly-built brig complex just around the bend from the Nest tower. This sat at the base of Li Na's clock tower, just outside the smoking remains of the Dagda temple.

The stench of burnt stew still filled the area a few days later. The bearded cleric within the temple had apparently boiled himself alive in his own stew, collateral damage from one of Li Na's dreads during the assault on Club Vanquisher.

Donut was still at the Nest, overseeing the mages who were enchanting the blocks. Li Na and Toyotomi were there with her, and they were showing Donut how to utilize the synergy aspect of the tower.

Li Jun clapped me on the shoulder. His new eye, which at the moment was a swirling orb of black, unnerved me. When it was working, the black changed to look like a miniature, clockwork engine, all contained in the round eye. Even the name of the thing was a little freaky. **The Engine of Tomorrow**. I wasn't clear on how it worked, but it gave him the ability to see muscles tensing, and it essentially slowed down his own perception of time in short bursts. This allowed Li Jun to predict where an opponent was going to strike next and react with amazing speed. Like Bullet Time from the *Matrix* movies. He and his sister had been training with it nonstop.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

“Me?” I asked, surprised. “I’m doing okay. I’m worried about Louis. I’m worried about Donut. I’m worried about Elle’s plan. I’m worried that Boomer’s battalion doesn’t have enough troops. I’m worried that we don’t know where the Dream’s troops are. I’m worried about all those war mage things that are going to pounce on us the moment the timer ends.”

“Yes, but what about *you*?” he persisted. “You seem a little... overworked after that raid on Club Vanquisher. Donut says you received over thirty loot boxes, but you’ve only really told us about your new brush and the potions. Donut said you got a patch, but you haven’t put it on your jacket yet. You usually post all the items in the group chat.” He indicated my Emberus tattoos. “Plus your hands are glowing now.”

I shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. The glow came from the *Heathen Burn* benefit I had for the rest of the floor.

I had, indeed, received 32 loot boxes. Plus several achievements. Plus a new quest after that previous fight. It was overwhelming. Like always, I copied all the achievements into my scratchpad. At the mention of them, I instinctively opened up the notepad and looked at the ones at the top.

After the battle had completed, and after we’d managed to tie up Milk, get ourselves out through the temple bathroom, bring her to the FUPA, and then drive all the way back to the closest saferoom, I’d met up with Donut and opened up our loot boxes.

I’d received over fifty achievements. Most of them, like usual, were for stupid shit that resulted in low-tier adventurer boxes. I’d also received multiple boxes and achievements for seeing gods for the first time, some of whom I didn’t even remember. None of those resulted in notable loot except a few low-tier rings that we’d ultimately given to Katia so she could test eating them.

I did, however, receive some important achievements:

New Achievement! Varg Vikernes!

Whoa, now. Calm down there, black metal enthusiast. Breaking into and defiling a church is one thing, but breaking into Club Vanquisher, hub of *all* religion? Causing chaos in the club is the equivalent of, I don’t know, giving the pope a wedgie and then tea-bagging him while he squirms on the floor.

Reward: You are permanently banned from Club Vanquisher. You are permanently banned from all temples except your own religion (Emberus) and any temples where you’ve been named friend of the

church (Apito. Eileithya. Eris. Grull. Hellik. Issitoq. Nekhebit. Theia. Yemaya.)

I had no idea what the name of the achievement meant, but it wasn't a surprise I'd been black-listed from all temples after that clusterfuck at Club Vanquisher.

That I'd been named "friend of the church" with some of those gods *was* surprising, however. Hellik had just added me to the list, despite my quest to kill him. Apito was a surprise, though she was somehow tied to all of this in a way I didn't yet understand. Eileithya, who was being driven by Huanxin Jinx, wasn't a surprise. Nor was it a surprise, her retainer, the Starbucks logo-looking Yemaya, had me white-listed since Donut and I had freed her on the previous floor. Odette was driving Nekhebit, and the Open Intellect's agent, Rectrix, was driving Theia. Issitoq and Eris were a mystery. But neither were nearly as big of a mystery as being named friend of the church to Grull. That just didn't make any sort of sense whatsoever.

This was all something I'd have to figure out later if we managed to survive the next few hours.

New Achievement! Liquified.

You, while immortal, blew yourself up. Like, you dropped a bomb at your feet. Hot damn! We have seen some crazy shit this season, but man, there's nothing quite like the simplicity of such a desperate move. The slow motion replay of that is really quite something. It was similar to watching something small and furry get smushed underfoot, but even more raw, more real, you know what I mean? What a goddamned rush.

Still... Did you know that only worked because you had god-tier immortality? Most versions of that spell would've still caused you to be splattered into so many pieces you would've never reconstituted in time. And don't even think about trying that with that other, bigger bomb you have in your inventory. You were lucky this time. If that had been a magical explosion...

Reward: You've received a Legendary Lucky Bitch Box.

The box contained a small patch of a group of four-leaf clovers being smashed under a bare foot. I sighed, thinking of it. The patch was sitting in my inventory, where it would remain. I don't know what the system was thinking when it gave it to me. It was clearly something I would never wear:

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This upgrade patch depicts a perfectly-perfect, mouthwatering human foot treading upon a patch of four-leaf clovers, creasing them as it presses down with gentle but oh-so-firm force. Despite their non-sentient nature, the clovers have a brief moment of awareness as they suffer, and it is fucking delicious.

Delicious.

Affixing this patch to an eligible garment will imbue the following benefits:

Lucky Shot. A fatal blow will be deflected into the body of a party member instead. This benefit may only be used once per floor.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

Even with Donut's *Cockroach* skill, there was no way I would risk wearing this. I didn't care how valuable it was. I wouldn't wear it, and I didn't want the others to know what it did, lest they attempt to talk me into installing it.

New Achievement! You in my house now, boy!

You have entered the temple of a god, you have pissed off that god to his face (well, in this particular case, you pissed him off to his weird-ass bug body head. Seriously. I can't stop thinking about how goddamned bizarre this guy is), and you have faced that god in battle in their own temple.

Reward: None! The only reason you're not getting a celestial box for this is because your ass was saved by another god.

That was true. Hellik had come along and banished Khepri before he could do something to me. And it wasn't just me. Katia and Prepotente had both received that achievement as well.

Still, it was irritating I hadn't received *anything* for that. I had blasted him with a bomb, twice. And now I was permanently marked for death by him. Though I suspected that wasn't going to last long. Khepri's original description had given me a pretty big hint about some things that were currently going down on the 12th floor. He and Odette's Nekhebit were in the same sub-pantheon. Someone was going through and killing off all the gods in that group. I figured it was either Odette for some reason or possibly Huanxin Jinx. I didn't know enough to form a proper guess.

New Achievement! Celestial Orgy of Chaos!

You have been in the presence of more than ten gods at once, and you survived.

Now, here's a mystery. Someone let out a bunch of gods who shouldn't have been allowed into the temple in the first place. It probably wasn't who you think it was. But the fact you survived this crazy orgy of a fight means you all need a serious pat on the back because I was pretty certain at least one of you—looking at you, Zhang—was toast.

Reward: You've received a Celestial Who Let the Gods Out *This Time?* box.

This was the one that Katia, Li Jun, Zhang, Prepotente, and I had all received. Bautista had gotten outside early in the fight, and he'd also received the achievement, but his had just been a legendary box. Still, he'd gotten an electronic guidebook on his stuffed animals, something that would tell him what each one did before he used it. All he had to do was either look it up in some complicated codex or scan the label, and an info box would pop up giving information on the plush. He'd promised to let me borrow it so I could scan that Kimaris figure I had, but we'd been so busy, it hadn't happened yet.

And speaking of the question, who let the gods out, it was still a mystery. Naturally, I'd assumed it had something to do with Samantha, but this time it didn't seem to be the case. The basilica ogre guards had come up from below to help in the fight, and that had, apparently, left the front door unguarded, but it seemed there was more to it than that, and it was yet another mystery.

New Achievement! Hey Larry, can I borrow your chainsaw?

You have utilized a borrowed skill or spell in battle. You have used this borrowed ability to kill an opponent. Oh, man. This opens up a whole new possibility of fighting styles, don't you think? Just keep those tattoos above the knee.

Reward: You've received a Platinum Have You Goddamned Figured Out How To Use This In Conjunction With the Fucking Voodoo Book Yet? Jesus Christ I Can Only Help You So Much box.

The reward was a skill potion that ended up bringing my Pugilism skill up to 15 on its own, which was great, but the name of the box had sent Mordecai and Rosetta into a flurry of research. Even Zev had commented on it, saying she'd never even heard of such blatant hand-holding by the AI.

In addition to the regular achievements, I'd also received a few messages and a quest from Emberus as well. I was hoping he'd cancel out the whole kill-my-brother thing, but Hellik's message had only served to enrage the god. And in fact, now everything was worse than it was before.

New Quest.

Fuck my brother. Fuck him to the fires of Sheol.

Kill 100 worshipers of Hellik. Do so before you reach the 12th floor.

Time Limit: This must be completed before the collapse of the 11th floor, and as a practical matter, you should complete it before you complete the Kill Hellik quest.

Reward: If you complete this quest, you will receive a permanent boon of Celestial quality.

At least there wasn't a penalty for failing this one, but more concerning was immediately after receiving this new quest, I had a second, confusing and alarming message from Emberus, this time in a more contemplative voice.

Emberus: Am I wrong to hate him? He has treated with Issitoq on our behalf, who has in turn allowed the peace to be breached. I am now allowed to kill the other Sheol princes in exchange for the information Amayon has about Geyrun. And what does he mean about our mother and sister? You, my martyr, be vigilant. If you survive killing Hellik, like he surely deserves, I fear I may turn my rage and grief on you for daring to hurt my own kin, and for this, I love you, beloved but doomed worshiper. I promise the burning will be exquisite.

What the actual fuck. Even re-reading this for the tenth time, it still filled me with such dread. It put me in an impossible position, and for the first time I started to wonder if I should just risk taking the smite instead.

That, of course, was the "out" that the patch gave me. I still wasn't even tempted to use it.

I sighed. Mordecai had warned us from the beginning to stay away from gods. He hadn't been wrong, but each day, it became more and more difficult, especially now.

I thought of the Gate of the Feral Gods, now in Elle's hands.

T-minus one hour before the chaos would begin.

"Has anyone tried to escape?" I asked.

“No,” Zhang said. “It’s pretty well built to protect against it. And by the time they’re in there, they’re all pretty resigned to their fate.”

Zhang’s new cape fluttered behind him. It was white with the standard black, blue, red, and yellow circles of an archery target on it. It was his prize in the celestial box. It was a great, but dangerous, item. It was a unique item called **Zhang’s Cape of Odds**. When it wasn’t activated, it gave him plus 15% across the board for all his stats plus a level 10 Dodge skill. His skill in that was already 11, so it brought it to 14.

But it also came with a once-an-hour skill called Roll the Dice, which reminded me of the Wheel of Fortune game at the casino. If he activated the skill, one of 333 different outcomes could appear. *Most* of the outcomes were great, such as doubled strength for ten minutes. The ability to fly for an hour, etc. There were a few really epic outcomes, as well, such as Death Ray and several various summons.

But there were 66 outcomes that were bad. None of them killed him outright, and all were temporary, but there was paralysis, all stats are now 5, and something called “It’s been four hours and I think it’s time to call the doctor” which sounded ominous as fuck. The worst was “Summon the God Who Hates You Most.”

But, and here was where the cape was especially insidious—and a true Celestial item—was that after 19 spins, you could manually pick one of the choices.

Zhang wore the cape proudly, but he said he wasn’t going to actually use it unless absolutely necessary.

“How many are left?” I asked as we approached the brig building.

“Just one,” Zhang said, sounding nervous, as if he was afraid to tell me. I wasn’t surprised at all.

When Li Na first approached me and asked if she could have my extra Ring of Divine Suffering, my initial reaction had been fuck no. She was quite possibly the most powerful crawler in the dungeon already, and I’d worried that while it would make her stronger, it’d also drive her to do something crazy. I’d briefly, and privately, discussed it with Katia, Imani, Donut, and Elle, and I’d been surprised at their reaction.

Only Imani had been against it. Katia and Elle were both adamant it was a good idea. Elle had been especially vehement.

She can handle it better than you certainly can, she’d said. And if she can’t, at least it’ll be the ring that kills her. She’s a scary psycho, but at least

she's our scary psycho, Carl. She's the quiet type of scary, too, not like you or goat boy. At least I always know what your mood is. With Li Na, we want to stay on her good side.

But it was Donut who'd truly made me want to give the second ring away. She didn't say her reasoning, but she'd looked at me, not using chat, and simply said, "Please, Carl. Please give it to her. Do it as soon as you can."

Li Na had also asked about the Necklace of Indelible Woe but ultimately decided she didn't want it, especially now that she had several level-15 dreads that she could possibly lose if she used the necklace. It remained in my inventory for now.

So, no, it wasn't a surprise that the brig—filled with off-world mercenaries we couldn't trust—was empty of all the prisoners save one, the one prisoner I'd specifically asked to leave alone.

It was also suddenly obvious to me why Donut had basically begged me to give her the ring.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. "Let's get this over with." We stepped into the building.

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RISHI THE NAGA, NOW OSTENSIBLY A MEMBER OF THE PRINCESS POSSE, stood before me. Without his armor and with his arms removed, he looked less like a naga and more like a massive cobra.

Li Jun and Zhang remained outside. I'd asked the guards to leave, leaving me alone in the small building with its lone occupant. My viewer count was spiked. In fact, the viewer needle had a blue hue to it that it didn't normally have, and I wasn't sure what that meant. I'd look it up after I was done with this.

I examined the large, green and purple snake, lit by a single spotlight. Darkness had settled outside, making the naga look especially menacing. He was the sole remaining member of the original Blood Sultanate left alive on the floor. He sat serenely in his small cell, a smug, strangely amused expression on his snake face.

He'd surrendered himself to Donut, Imani, and Elle shortly after we'd killed Vinata. He'd buried himself in the dirt outside the castle and had waited for it all to be over before emerging.

Because he wasn't a blood member of the court, he wasn't a part of the whole Sepsis Whore quest. But, in real life, he had been married to a distant cousin of the royal family. He'd been the representative Vinata had sent for the pre-production meetings, and I got the impression outside the dungeon he held a fairly important role in the real naga government.

As a rule, when we defeated another faction, mercenaries would be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, but in general, if they were just grunts, I'd allow them to join up with us. My standing rule was to kill the higher-up officers immediately before they became a problem even though they, too, were now technically members of the Princess Posse. The *Conscription* spell was far from perfect, and I knew of several tricks one could employ to hinder an army's efforts even with the debuff active.

If they were a member of the actual management team, a part of the original group that willingly came here to fight, they were treated differently. They were to be kept alive, encased with magic protection, and left alone until I could get to them. Li Na's White Dragons were in charge of keeping the prisoners.

I knew Rishi was no coward, so the strange manner in which he'd hidden himself was more than just curious. It didn't make any damn sense. I'd been putting off visiting him, but it was finally time.

According to the guards, Rishi hadn't said much since he'd surrendered, though he'd asked more than once to speak with me. He just sat there silently in the cell, completely encased in a square-shaped containment shield that would protect against most bombs and cloud attacks. The shield also had a prismatic effect, which made him appear as if he was on a television screen. This would supposedly protect from charm spells and things like the Eye of the Bedlam Bride, should he have something like that hidden upon him. In addition, he was stripped of his gear, and the cell had a secondary shield around it that would keep him from casting anything. We didn't have a method to keep him from pulling something from his inventory, but the *Conscription* spell mostly prevented him from attacking me and the guards.

Still, *someone*—clearly Li Na—thought it would be best to take extra precautions and had his four arms removed, which was especially barbaric. He would still be able to drop things out of his inventory, but his ability to wield weapons was severely diminished. He claimed his inventory was empty of weapons and magical items, and all that he carried was some documents, water, and food.

"Why weren't you with your wife and the princess in the temple of Khepri?" I asked.

The large, green and purple naga smiled down at me, his tongue flicking out. "I knew that if I went with my wife into that temple, I would be just as

dead as everyone else. I warned them all not to go, but the late princess believed her plan to kill you with a god was a sound one.”

“It was,” I said. “It almost worked. But I’m more curious about you. You don’t seem too broken up about the death of your princess. Or your wife.”

Rishi didn’t stop smiling. “I was quite fond of my primary wife, despite the fact she hadn’t yet given me a clutch. But I had already grieved her death starting from the moment the mantis team fled. I implored Vinata that we, too, should leave, yet she insisted we stay. So I made peace with my inevitable death then.”

“The mantis team abandoned faction wars sometime around the sixth floor,” I said. “You expected to die even back then?”

The armless naga chuckled softly. “I did not expect you and the crawlers to rise up like you have, nor did I expect Faction Wars itself to be the manner of my death, but it was clear something was wrong. The mantids do not flee anything, and for them to run like that... They were scared of something.” He paused. “Did you know that the Aryl system went dark the moment Princess Formidable hit the failsafe?”

“Princess Formidable herself didn’t make it to the failsafe,” I said. “The AI pulled her off her ship and dropped her into the ocean on the surface. But, yes. I did hear that. That was where the last season occurred.”

Rishi nodded, but he didn’t elaborate his point.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I finally said. “Why did you hide? Why didn’t you fight? I thought you were honorable.”

He paused for a very long time. “Have you heard the term ‘The Great Consensus’ before?”

I had. I had heard it from Loita. Loita the kua-tin I’d assassinated on the fifth floor.

“It’s some sort of nazi bullshit, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know that term. But it is a philosophy that is gaining momentum amongst many systems. It basically teaches the Syndicate was a mistake, and we are all better off on our own. There are many aspects of it, and some have taken the idea and turned it into something xenophobic and evil, which is ironic considering the name of the philosophy. The Bloom party of the kua-tin, for example, believe in racial purity and dislike the cultural influence of so-called ‘dry’ races. The mantids disdain what they believe are weaker and inferior species. Amongst the naga, some want what

you want. Some naga believe while we can learn from each other, alien communities should have no say in how we live our lives.”

I grunted. “You sure have a funny way of showing it.”

He nodded. “I agree. And I know you don’t believe it, but Vinata was a firm believer in this philosophy. She’d seen war on alien soil, and she firmly believed it was all for nothing. Her father insisted she participate in Faction Wars. We needed the tourist money. We needed to keep the shipyards staffed and running. We were going to steal the entire fleet and run. We were going to travel, as a whole, for an entire generation, off in a direction that none of the tunnel threads point. Off to a place where it would be a very, very long time before we were found. That was our Great Consensus, engineered by Princess Vinata. To leave.”

I leaned in. “I don’t give a shit. What does any of that have to do with you hiding like a little bitch while your wife and princess died?”

He sighed. “Just before the meeting of the warlords, news broke that laid out our plans regarding our intention to renege on our shipyard contracts, which caused immediate chaos in our system. Because of the Emergency Action Item you enacted, we were no longer able to see what else was happening at home. That is when I decided to flee and hide.”

“Why?”

“So I could implore upon you our plight and make an offer to you. It was a gamble, but I suspected Vinata would fall. I have in my inventory a signed and AI witnessed document for you, the de-facto leader of Earth.”

I laughed. He did not.

A sheet of paper appeared and dropped to the floor. I couldn’t get it through the protections, and it landed sideways, against the shield. It was covered with glittering, holographic seals.

“Leader of Earth? Are you smoking crack?”

“Syndicate law dictates that in the absence of a working government, the native leader of a planetary body will be chosen by multiple factors. And while there are other military groups upon the surface who are clearly more suited, as well as other in-dungeon entities who could easily claim the title, the fact you are a warlord *and* the number one crawler on the leaderboard makes your claim legitimate. And because no formal leadership claim has yet been filed, we petitioned on your behalf while drafting that document, and the court granted the petition. The position is mostly honorary, but it does allow you to be a signatory on Earth’s behalf.”

“What?” I asked. “What does that even mean? And what does the document say?”

He seemed to shrug, which was difficult without arms. “I’m sure your attorney can explain it to you. But the document does nothing unless you sign it. It gives Earth natives citizenship rights in all naga territories, plus five Naphil-class generation ships. This is in exchange for allowing us to terraform and settle upon the other planets in your system post crawl once there is no longer a quarantine.”

“You *are* smoking crack. How is that a good trade off?”

“For a while, I assumed the failsafe would be blown, and that would be how we died. But we waited too long, and the system has gone primal. I still expect us all to die, but now I am no longer certain about the fate of those on the surface. You have millions of fellow humans up there, struggling. If this were a normal crawl, the system would go into a quarantine for some time post crawl. It would eventually open up, and the parasites from all corners would descend and bleed you dry. If it still ends that way, the children of your survivors will need friends. We can help each other. And by granting you five Generation ships, you can guarantee the survival of your progeny. Or you can sell the ships in exchange for protection. If this ends like usual, those planets *will* be settled whether you like it or not.”

“And if it doesn’t end like usual?” I asked.

“If you are wiped out, then we have lost nothing. But if not, this is where our gamble truly pays off. If your people manage to persist, if the post-crawl collection doesn’t happen, this macro AI will continue to spread, and, perhaps, a new inner system-style community will emerge with all the benefits of the current inner system. The natives will be protected by the AI and will soon rise to be some of the richest, most influential forces in the galaxy. And my people, who protected you during your time of turmoil, will emerge as great friends of the citizens of Earth, and both shall prosper.”

I was still reeling over the whole “de-facto ruler of Earth” thing. And sometime during his explanation, I stopped fully paying attention. But I still caught the gist of it. “And Vinata signed this? This doesn’t sound anything like that Great Consensus thing. In fact, it sounds like the opposite.”

“No,” Rishi said. “She did not sign it. She would not agree to something like this. I said she was a proponent of the philosophy. I am not. I drafted this, and I am the one who signed it.”

I just looked at the snake. “You? I’m confused. Are you allowed to make such deals?”

New Achievement! Holistic!

Your feed has reached a 95%+ viewer ratio of a single system!

Over 95% of all viewers in the entire, newly-coined Naga Protectorate of the New Reformer are currently watching your feed!

Reward: You have received a Legendary Fan Box! This box will only be voted on by viewers in the Naga system.

“I *am* allowed to make such deals,” Rishi said, pulling himself taller. “I am allowed because I am now the leader of the new Naga Sultanate.”

“Uh,” I said. “I thought all that sultan stuff was in your history. What about the current king guy? Vinata’s father?”

“My brothers should have him properly deposed by now. Him and his remaining children, along with the prime minister and the entirety of the House of Greens. We have been planning this for some time now. And you, Carl, with your influence...”

I held up my hand, stopping him. I was staring down at the contract, still on the floor. He’d signed it all right. He’d signed it *Sultan Rishi the Usurper, First of his Name of the Naga Uprising*.

I laughed. That was *not* the same name that had been in that achievement.

“You know what? I don’t actually care about any of this *Game of Thrones* bullshit. I just have a question for you. What happens to that contract if you die before I sign it?”

He flicked his tongue. “It will be up to the new leadership to decide if it is valid, and it’ll have to be re-signed by the new leader or council. After what has happened, it may take some time. But if I am to be kept alive, you will be certain that some semblance of stability will...”

I held up my hand again.

Warning: Open Hostilities begin in 40 minutes.

Elle: Katia, you are a genius. You timed it perfectly.

Katia: Thank Milk. Her maps are insanely accurate.

My chat was filled with preparations. I needed to hurry this up. So far we didn’t see any enemy movement except some repositioning of the orc troops. I had to get this over with and get into place. I hadn’t actually expected any of this posturing from the naga when I came here, and I hadn’t planned this sort of conversation. But I had been curious, and now I knew

why he'd done what he had. He was just like all the others, like Empress D'Nadia. A power-hungry asshole. It was oddly disappointing.

I looked the naga up and down. "I'd like to renegotiate on behalf of Earth."

He straightened even further, and his tongue flicked again.

"Of course. Tell me your terms."

"This is what I want. I want you to shut up. I want your people to take those ships you offered us, to get into them, and to drive yourselves into the nearest star. But first, I want you, Mr. new Sultan of the naga, to know something."

I paused, and he didn't respond. But that smug look on his snake face had finally left.

The thirty seconds have passed.

You have successfully marked Rishi of the Princess Posse.

His highest stat is Dexterity.

"Some people might find all of these politics interesting. But me? It makes my head hurt. I can't get away from it. I know, I know. It's probably important for me to be aware of all this stuff. But not today. Today I'm just happy that all your people are watching. You know why? Because it means they get to watch yet another of their so-called leaders killed. And spoiler alert for those at home. Rishi here is just the opening act."

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER CARL, 25TH EDITION>

Operation: Ruin consists of four separate offensives, followed by what Donut calls the “Coup De War Crime.”

Each of the four offensives kick off simultaneously and will have multiple, coordinated prongs.

If all goes to plan, everything should be done under seven hours. And since it never goes to plan, we have multiple contingencies in place including a rapid-deploy battalion—the 105th, split in two—ready to teleport to any part of the battlefield at any moment.

In addition, we will have support from Juice Box and the NPC team for all four offensives. Britney will coordinate all of our communication with Team Retribution. It seems she’s become quite close with Juice Box. She’s gotten very good at being a go-between, working multiple lines of communication with the skill of a seasoned police dispatcher.

Florin will deal with the orcs, Boomer with the Reavers, Donut with the Dream, and my task is the Madness. Tipid will remain at the FUPA to defend, and Rosetta is the designated “Theater Commander,” meaning she is in charge of coordinating it all. In addition, Louis will be making multiple bomb runs in support of different operations. There are too many details to relate, and doing so in a single post is akin to trying to explain the Iron Tangle without a map. So I will do my best to focus. I know I will falter in

this. I know I will constantly be looking up the status of this operation or that. How can I not when I know friends will die today?

But I will do my best.

So instead of rehashing the entire operation here, I will instead tell you what I must do today.

I will hitch a ride with Louis aboard Party Planner and accompany him on his first bomb run over orc territory. My presence will greatly increase the yield of his bombs. Louis will then drop me and Samantha off in Reaver territory where I will meet up with Elle. We will leave Samantha for her part in Boomer's offensive against the Reavers. And then Elle and I will move together, using the Gate of the Feral Gods to enter the territory of the Madness where my operation to find and kill Houston will begin.

The Princess Posse's objective is to win this war today. Mine is to lead the operation to defeat the Madness.

I need to focus, but it is so hard.

If this is my last entry, know I went down fighting.

Hello, crawlers! Hello, fighters!

Combined message today. Open Hostilities begin soon.

I don't give a shit what any of you do by this point. Seriously. I just want it to end, and I want you to know I hate all of you.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"Wow," Louis said from the cockpit.

We hadn't gotten an update at all from Cascadia in a few days, and this one had just come out of nowhere.

Donut: I THINK SHE NEEDS A VACATION.

Samantha floated into the cabin of *Party Planner*, squeezed between the bombs, and parked herself on my lap. She was quivering with excitement. She smelled like bourbon and cigar smoke. Her neck was doing that revolting thing where it wriggled back and forth. My leg burned slightly when she rubbed her stump against bare skin.

"Where have you been?" I asked, rearranging her. "We almost had to leave without you. And who did that to your hair?"

“I was entertaining the GIs, Carl. Soldiers always need comfort just before a major battle. And Kiwi did it to my hair. For a one-eyed preggo who used to be a dinosaur, she sure has deft fingers. I would’ve made a move on her if Mongo wasn’t right there and if we had a bag handy. Do you know that when you and Donut are in the planning room doing planning stuff, Mongo goes in the kitchens and sniffs Kiwi’s butt so much she has to swat him away? Anyway, don’t you just love my hair? They’re called victory rolls! Aren’t they elegant? By the way, do you know what G.I. stands for? Louis says it stands for ground infantry, but Florin said it actually means galvanized iron, so of course I had to threaten Florin’s alligator mother, and he said his mother wasn’t even an alligator which got us all talking about Kiwi again. She’s going to be giving birth any day now. Isn’t that exciting? But I just love my hair like this. I told Kiwi when I get my body back, she can move in with me and my king and do my hair like that every day as long as her mongrel babies are potty trained and don’t come out too ugly.”

Her hair was in some complicated, 1940’s style with two giant swirls. The whole thing was going to fall apart the moment we dumped out of *Party Planner*. It wasn’t quite a pompadour, but I was suddenly reminded of Fire Brandy the lesser demon from the Iron Tangle.

Mordecai had been playing WWII and Vietnam war movies in the saferoom for some of the younger changelings, and Samantha had been watching them, too. The kids had been angry at my whole “No child soldier” pronouncement, especially since someone pointed out that Donut was younger than most of them. Mordecai thought that showing them war movies, such as *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, and *Saving Private Ryan*—movies that focused on the horrors of war—would help dissuade the kids from wanting to get in on the action. Predictably, the whole thing backfired, and the kids were complaining louder than ever. Samantha had apparently been enraptured by the movies. She’d been sulking after the incident in Club Vanquisher with the “imposter” playing her mother, but the movies had strangely turned her mood around. She’d been zipping around the battalions, providing what she called “moral support” to the soldiers. According to Tipid, that mostly meant sexually harassing them and stealing their alcohol.

“Sure. It’s elegant as...” I paused, realizing what was scrawled on her forehead had finally changed. I sighed.

The “Miss Me?” had been replaced with a new statement. “Fuck the Cheese Dicks.”

“It’s cheese *sticks*, Samantha. Sticks. Not cheese dicks.”

“I don’t think so, Carl. Cheese sticks doesn’t even make sense. Sticks come from trees. Why would there be a tree made out of cheese? I know one goddess whose clitoris got turned into the head of a bald man named Otis-Ray who spends his day begging to be fed cabbage, so it makes much more sense that a penis would be turned to a food item.”

The conversation was, thankfully, interrupted by Donut.

Donut: THEY INSTALLED THE WIRELESS PA SPEAKERS IN TIME! ISN’T THAT GREAT?

Carl: The whole system? On *all* the towers?

Donut: WE BOUGHT THE SYSTEM, AND IT INSTALLED ITSELF. WE GOT THE DELUXE PACKAGE, AND THERE ARE MORE SPEAKERS THAN TOWERS. IT EVEN INTERFACES WITH MY HEADSET, AND I CAN PULL UP ONE OF THOSE RECORDING STUDIO BOARD THINGIES WITH ALL THE SLIDY DIALS. THERE’S SOMETHING CALLED DISTORTION AND DELAY AND REVERB. OOH HH WHAT’S A PHASER? ISN’T THAT FROM STAR TREK?

Carl: Jesus. Get Li Na’s permission before you use it. You’ll blow out the ears of everyone in Shanty Town.

Donut: I AM A WARLORD. I DON’T ASK PERMISSION. I GIVE ORDERS. BUT I WILL WARN THEM. BUT NOW I CAN ALSO USE BARD SPELLS.

Carl: We’ll save that in case we need it.

Donut: BUT YOU SAID WE NEED TO KEEP THEM DISTRACTED. I COULD TAUNT THEM. I THINK I’M GONNA TAUNT THEM. I HAVE PLENTY OF BALD AND PASTY PEOPLE JOKES READY TO GO. BUT IF YOU THINK THAT MIGHT HURT THE FEELINGS OF SOME OF OUR OWN BALD AND PASTY PEOPLE, I CAN TALK ABOUT HOW LOUIS BASICALLY HAD SEX WITH HIS MOM.

Carl: You have enough to worry about. They’ll be plenty distracted. What you don’t want is unnecessary god attention. You shrieking over a massive PA is just going to work against what we’re trying to do.

Donut: I DON'T SHRIEK, CARL. AND TOYOTOMI SAYS THE DEFLECTOR TOWERS KEEP THE GODS AWAY.

Carl: Think of it like an electric fence. They're far from foolproof. Remember when Bea's cousin was making fun of the gorilla at the zoo, and it smashed the glass? Think of it like that.

Donut: OKAY. IMANI IS HERE WITH ME NOW, AND SHE'S SAYING THE SAME THING.

Carl: Good. Listen to her advice. And remember what I said. Aim your shots. Breathe. Make each shot count. You can do this.

Donut: I KNOW I CAN DO THIS, CARL. I AM A WARLORD.

System Message: 90 Second Warning.

Carl: Okay. Don't be afraid to jump away at the first sign of trouble.

Carl: Elle. Any sign of Tagg?

Elle: Not yet. Sorry. Edgar is buried and stationed a few miles away and will let us know if he's spotted.

Carl: Okay. You be safe. I'll meet you in the middle.

Elle: Happy hunting, Cowboy.

I looked up at Louis and nodded. From the cockpit, he gave me a thumbs up. *Party Planner* silently rose into the night air as Samantha continued to chat away. My stomach lurched as we surged upward, trees, then dark, smoky clouds, then the imaginary, starlit sky whipping by as the airship engaged stealth mode and started to speed toward its target.

"Ceiling is really high," Louis called as we continued to rise. "It's higher even than the bubbles."

"How do you even know what the ceiling is?" I had to shout.

He tapped his console. "There's an indicator."

Through the open doors to my left and right, I couldn't really see anything below but the dark haze of clouds. Most of the factions had started burning smoke the moment they saw Donut's tower. It wasn't going to matter. Donut and Louis both could see right through it all, a skill I didn't have.

The ship was so full of armament, there wasn't enough room to move. My vision was a mass of stability notifications over the dozens of bombs, and I had to dim the notifications to actually see anything if I wasn't staring out the open side door. Just my presence stabilized them and massively

increased the yield. The moment I dimmed the notifications, I saw the two dots hidden in the back of the ship.

“Goddamnit,” I called, turning around from my spot to see the small gnomish girl peeking around the back pile of the square-shaped No Disassemble EMP bombs. “Skarn and Bonnie! What did I say?” I cursed myself for not paying better attention. Bonnie had a large snake wrapped around her arm. Skarn.

Carl: Louis, turn it around. We gotta land.

The two kids, one changeling and one gnome, had been explicitly banned from manning the door guns on *Party Planner*. Especially today.

System Message: Here we go, bitches! Let chaos reign!

“Oh, fuck!” Louis called, and the ship dove. “Get to the guns! Get to the guns! We have incoming! Lots of incoming!”

I cursed as warlord notifications started streaming through my interface. Dozens of distant streaks of light appeared through the cockpit window, emerging up from the clouds like needles pushing up through dark cotton. Missiles. They were fired from Reaver territory. Likely with advanced seekers. They turned and corkscrewed through the air, and despite *Party Planner*’s stealth capabilities, they headed right toward us. Louis’s cockpit was beeping furiously.

At the same time, the long-range, magical artillery from deep in the Dream territory started to fire. The massive, flaming balls—significantly bigger and more powerful than what they were able to fire during the previous phase—started arcing through the sky, likely split evenly between the FUPA and the Nest tower. Their passage painted the night, like they were tearing a hole through the fabric of darkness.

We were expecting the magical artillery. We had not anticipated the Reaver missiles, especially not ones so smart. They, too, had airships, but we figured if they were going to attack us, they would move straight for the headquarters or hit either Florin or Tran.

“Gotta lower into the trees!” Louis called.

“That won’t stop seekers!” I yelled back, pushing Samantha off me as I tried to stand and reposition myself so I could see better. “Stay above the tree line so we can shoot them down!”

I couldn’t quite stand to my full height and had to keep my head to the side. Bonnie shoved me aside and quickly started unbuckling the large gun from stowage against the interior of the fuselage. These were upgraded guns

from the ballista system she'd used before. Skarn moved to the other side, changing form so he looked like a Chee, like Holger.

Bonnie appeared to be completely calm. She was even chewing gum. The tiny gnome girl was no longer wearing her Dallas Cowboys jersey and now wore an oversized shirt from someone in the 105th Scream Warriors. It depicted a crudely drawn, bloody child berserker character holding an axe. The berserker was a little girl that had to be eight years old, which explained why Bonnie had taken to it. Underneath it was the unit's motto. "We bleed when the job's done."

Entering the realm of the Bone Clan.

You are at war with this team.

This airship is cloaked.

Cloaking has possibly been compromised.

"Some of the incoming missiles are exploding," Louis called. "Why are they exploding?"

"Probably the orc defenses," I said as I grasped a handhold on the ceiling. I couldn't see anything anymore as we dove through the clouds and smoke, coming out just above the tree line. The tops of the alien trees whipped by like a treadmill just below us. "The Reavers and the orcs aren't talking, so maybe they think the missiles are aimed at them. Are we sure they aren't?"

"They didn't get all of them!" Louis called, punching buttons on his newly-upgraded panel. "Looks like three got through. They're locked on us! Something else is out there, too. Something big. Gonna turn broadside."

"What? Why?" I called.

Louis ignored me. "Bonnie, they'll be coming from above but directly in front of you!"

"Got it, boss," Bonnie called. A helmet appeared on her head. It was a modified gnomish farseer, built around a small-sized, metallic flak helmet. It was so ridiculously large on the small form, it made her look like a steampunk bobblehead. "I see 'em. All three are bunched up. In range in three, two, one."

Jesus, I thought, watching the gnome tracking upward with her gun.

She fired three short bursts from her weapon, one after another. The red tracer fire arced from the gun, slicing through the night. The clouds above lit with purple, magical light, followed quickly by a wave of heat. "Splash three."

“Great job, kid!” Louis called. “Resuming mission. Whatever that big thing is, it looks like it’s circling above the Reaver castle.” *Party Planner* turned in the air.

Samantha was bouncing up and down, shouting encouragement to Bonnie.

“If they can track us, I better keep to the cloud cover,” Louis called. “I keep getting notifications that we’ve been temporarily spotted.” We rose, the dark smoke pushing in on both sides. It suddenly felt oppressive, claustrophobic. Multiple, distant explosions started to echo.

I was already deep in my messages as they flooded in.

Donut: CARL, CARL MY FLAK SPELL WORKS REALLY GOOD! THE STUPID DREAM ELVES ARE ALREADY SHOOTING AT ME, AND THEY DIDN’T EVEN GET CLOSE!

General Elle: Gate one is open, and I’m stepping through. Let’s see what comes out of this one. Next stop, the Reavers. Don’t be late, Carl.

Colonel Rosetta: Head’s up, everyone. Feral God number one is on the way. It’s gonna appear near the Dream castle.

General Tran: Dream artillery is targeting us, not the FOOP! Some of it is getting through! Spreading out and bunkering in.

Oh shit, I thought. If they weren’t targeting the headquarters, that meant...

Colonel Tipid: Activated base defense just in time. Two or three battalion strength of Dreamers just teleported outside the FUPA. They’re making a run for the throne room!

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I thought. The ability to teleport entire battalions at once, as opposed to opening a gate, was near impossible. It required five mages with the same spell to chant for a full thirty hours straight to pull it off. I knew this because we had two groups—two halves of the 105th Scream Warriors—who’d already done the same and were now waiting to be rapidly deployed anywhere. While this practice of mass teleportation wasn’t unheard of, both Rosetta and Mordecai said it’d only happened a handful of times in Faction Wars because of how grueling the process was.

I quickly moved to the officer band to take a peak.

Rosetta: Justice, it’s Dreamers.

Justice Light: How many?

Rosetta: I think it’s all of them.

Justice Light: That's too many. Chop 'em up a little first for me, Rosie. Get 'em down to under 3,000, then we can let them in. I will welcome any and all guests into my lair. Would prefer it be Reaver, but I'll take what I can get.

Rosetta: Tipid, how are you holding up?

Tipid: They're moving hard and fast. They have heavy armor. More than the allotted ten. I'm going to have to request backup already.

Donut: KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR EPITOME TAGG. IF YOU SEE HIM, TELL HIM I'M LOOKING FOR HIM.

Rosetta: Don't worry, Donut. We'll paint him for you if we see him. I'm making the order for half the 105th to defend location number one. We'll still have the second half battalion ready to go. Jorgen, send them over.

Jorgen: They're coming.

A distant, soundless flash momentarily lit the world with a yellow-tinged light.

The Feral God Meatus has entered the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Mordecai: Oh, fuck.

Rosetta: Yes! Good job, Elle. The Dream have made a tactical error leaving their castle unprotected. They brought their army out too far from home.

Donut: BRITNEY, MOVE ON THE ELF CASTLE.

Rosetta: Wait! Don't use the digger!

Mordecai: No! Hold off. If Meatus is the feral god that escaped the Nothing, that means...

A second, blue-tinged light flashed.

The escaped feral god has summoned a deity!

Harpocrates has made an appearance in the realm!

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Rosetta: Britney, abort! Abort! Tell them not to use the digger near that god!

Tipid: I swear this happens every season.

Britney: Telling them now! Don't know if it's too late or not!

MORDECAI: DONUT, DO NOT USE YOUR PA WHILE HARPOCRATES IS out!

Donut: WHY? DOES HE HATE GOOD MUSIC? I JUST FOUND THE PLAY SONG BUTTON ON THE SOUNDBOARD. I HAVE THE PERFECT SONG READY TO GO.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Stick to the plan!

Mordecai: Harpocrates hates sound. He *will* come for you if you're being too loud. Just let him deal with the feral god. This whole Meatus versus Harpocrates thing is an old story, though it's usually a storyline that plays out during the Ascendency battles. Harpo is going to fight and kill Meatus, and then he's going to, uh, try to do something with Meatus. But it's not going to work, which is going to enrage him. Then he's going to stick around for some time smashing everything noisy until he times out.

Carl: Oh, shit. Are the diggers loud?

Mordecai: They're dwarven. Everything the dwarves do is loud. Luckily, Meatus is louder.

Donut: OH MY GOODNESS, LOOK AT THAT THING! IT LOOKS LIKE JACK'S PENIS FROM THE SECOND FLOOR! CARL, WHY DO ALL THESE GODS LOOK LIKE PENISES? IS THAT MEATUS OR THE DEAF GUY?

Mordecai: Yeah, uh. That's Meatus. Meatus is actually two beings, though they only have one name. Originally he was a normal-sized gremlin-like creature who stole Harpocrates's dink, sewed it on himself, and became a god.

Donut: DINK? DID YOU JUST CALL IT A DINK? IS THAT A CANADIAN TERM? AND HOW IS IT LOUD?

Mordecai: It's an old story and kind of a dumb, recurring joke. The gremlin part of Meatus stays the same size no matter where or how he's summoned, but the dink itself takes on the size that the god would if he was summoned to the same area. That part of him is sapient and very loud and doesn't want to go back to Harpocrates because it likes music. And Harpocrates isn't deaf. He is the god of silence, and he can hear the heartbeat of a fly from half a planet away.

Donut: OMG I LIKE THIS MEATUS GUY ALREADY.

A massive, slurping noise echoed across the battlefield. It shook the airship as it passed, and it came with the scent of a rotten soft cheese. It sounded like wet sewage getting sucked through a grate.

Next to me, Bonnie started making gagging noises.

Donut: I CHANGED MY MIND I'M GONNA BARE.

"See, Carl!" Samantha cried from my lap. "See! Cheese dick!"

"I'm pretty sure that's the most disgusting thing you've ever said."

More notifications flooded in. Too many to deal with. So far, the only hand-to-hand fighting was Florin versus the orc forces and Tipid defending against the Dream assault on the FUPA. Other than the missiles and whatever was guarding their airspace, there was no sign yet of the Reaver military, nor the Viceroy's. This wasn't surprising as intelligence suggested both would hold their armies back to defend their strongholds.

"Okay," Louis said, bringing me back to the now. "Rising again to make the bomb run. Look, there's the castle!"

He pointed out the cockpit, but all I could see in the darkness was haze and a few lights, indicating the King's Point, headquarters of the orcs.

Florin: Head's up. Some massive, mechanized tank just dug itself out of the riverbank and bloody leaped across the river, falling into our south flank. The thing is like five meters tall. It looks like a scorpion, but it's the size of one of those industrial haul trucks. It's covered in shields and it's about to tear us a new asshole. The thing must weigh

700 tons. Pretty sure it's being piloted by Warlord Stalwart himself. I think some of the mages might be on that thing, too.

I fought the urge to get in on the chat and offer suggestions.

I moved to the main band battle chat, which was an even bigger mess. Missile support was being piloted by Bomo and Sledge. They were based in Shanty Town where they could run to Donut's aid, but the actual missile batteries they were controlling were mostly fired from Area 52 in the woods. Each battery was controlled via a long-range magical trigger, all tied to a pair of controllers the system called a Trollish Portable Control Room. The controllers looked like 80's era keyboards with a magical screen above them, and they were fairly common in the dungeon. Supposedly some seasons had gauntlet-style floors where you had to get to a central control room and kill the trolls who were operating the traps.

For Bomo and Sledge, we had a former crawler modify the controllers to mimic the cretin-sized game controllers we'd made since they were already familiar with them. Painted targets would appear on the screen, and they could select specific missiles to launch at the targets. We had over 1,500 missiles of various kinds ready to go.

Florin: Missile support, just painted a target. It's a mobile tank. Hit it with chaffs and mix in a few *Mute* missiles.

Sledge: On it, boss man.

Britney: Louis, report. Semeru say they're on standby waiting for your bomb run.

Louis: Heigh ho, silver! Bombing now!

"Watch your feet!" Louis called out loud.

I was so busy reading the chat I'd promised myself I'd try to stay away from, I hadn't realized we'd already reached the target. Samantha had gotten herself into the cockpit and was shouting excitedly. The entire cabin lit up as every bomb on board suddenly armed itself. I concentrated, and **Overclocked** appeared over each bomb.

"Bombs away!" Louis called, and several spots on the ship's floor slid open at the same time. Tendrils of freezing mist curled up into the cabin as the airship bucked. *Ching, ching, ching, ching*. The square, shield and tech-busting No Disassembles clinked as they zipped out of the holders, pulled down by gravity, followed by the round high-yield Waffle Makers, which were shaped like tubes. These made a different, heavier sound as they

clunked out the holder, disappearing into the mist. The entire load was dropped in seconds.

“What is that thing?” Bonnie asked, peering out the open door. The gnomish farseer was spinning on her head, trying to zoom in on something I couldn’t see in the darkness. “It’s alive, not an airship. It has a shield over it.”

“Focus on below. They haven’t reacted yet, but they will,” Skarn called, peering out his side.

Blam, blam, blam! The first bombs hit the invisible shield. Each detonation felt like a slap in my chest. That was followed a second later by even more explosions, and the distinctive *thwum* of several shields getting cracked open like an egg.

“They’re firing their *Flak* spells, but it’s not good against gravity bombs,” Louis called. “And I think they taxed their anti-air on the Reaver missiles! Looks like the shield is down way more than... whoa fuck!”

A beam of green light shot up in the air, missing us by about 100 feet as we rocketed away. The light hit the invisible ceiling of the level and crackled, spreading across the barrier just above *Party Planner* like liquid lightning being poured out upside down. We angled down and away as the dark night suddenly took on a green glow. We disappeared back into the smoke.

“Jesus, I think that was a long-range death ray,” I said. “Probably a synergy tower with a war mage in it.”

“You missed,” Louis shouted, punching the ceiling.

Britney: North attack. Dwarves moving in. Air, confirm you’re clear.

Louis: We’re clear.

Britney: They’re dropping the agitators.

“Now it’s our turn,” Louis shouted, screaming out the window, still amped up, punching his fist. I’d never seen him like this before.

“Get them! Get them, Louis!” Samantha shouted, jumping up and down in the cockpit.

Britney: Dwarves confirm the lava tubes have been successfully agitated and the mountain is beginning rapid eruption. They’re setting up barriers and moving out and positioning themselves for lava abatement.

Below and behind us, the mountain upon which the King's Point castle sat was about to have a very, very bad day. The eruption would be miniscule compared to something like the Mount Saint Helens blast, whose lateral explosion annihilated everything within eight miles, but it would be enough to blow the top off the small mountain and completely obliterate the castle, leaving nothing but a throne room just sitting there in open air.

The eruption itself posed extreme danger to anyone in the area, especially Florin and the 101st who were near the base of the mountain, but the dwarves supposedly had a plan to rapidly stem the lava flow, keeping it from hitting Larracos.

We'd all thought the volcano idea was great. All except Elle, who'd be sitting next door in Reaver territory when it went off. Florin had just said, "Wicked, mate," when we told him we could blow the mountain top.

We all held our collective breath.

A shouting voice echoed throughout the land. "NOT THIS TIME. I AM FREE, AND YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GO BACK!" This was Meatus, fighting the silent god Harpocrates, all the way on the other side of the map. The deep voice was like that of a big, beefy wrestler trying to shout while gargling messily on something thick. "I YEARN TO SING."

Donut: THE WIENER GUY JUST SMACKED THE OTHER GOD LIKE A BASEBALL BAT, AND HE WENT FLYING RIGHT INTO THE DREAM CASTLE. IT'S WORKING!

Imani: So much for deflector towers keeping the gods away. The Dream castle had two.

Rosetta: Britney, what's the status of the south digger?

Britney: It held off at the last moment. It's just below the surface, waiting for the gods to move away. The Dream castle's shields are down, and they report the remaining elves are starting to flee.

Rosetta: Donut, you're up. Officially handing off the southern campaign to you.

Donut: AND SO IT BEGINS.

"Why is it taking so long for the mountain to explode?" Louis asked.

Britney: Guys, guys, watch out! The orcs added an emergency or backup shield over the whole mountain, and the dwarves are saying too much pressure is...

The mountain behind us blew its top, and we were much too close.

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THE MOUNTAIN EXPLODED, AND SUDDENLY, WE WERE SPINNING, cartwheeling through the air. I smashed to the ceiling of *Party Planner* and crashed back down as we twirled like we'd been flicked away.

"Hold on!" Louis shouted as we looped. The vertical spin corrected, but we still spun like a top, and we were actually going up, not down. To my right, Skarn had changed to an octopus-like creature, and he had five or six arms wrapped around a screaming Bonnie, keeping them both in the cabin. One of Bonnie's small arms was clearly broken, but it healed as I watched.

A terrible, screeching noise filled the air as the airship's propellers bounced off the floor's ceiling. One of them broke off and tumbled away, smoking as the ship finally corrected itself. From the cockpit, Louis was cursing loudly, but we didn't fall. I remembered he'd said we could still fly with as little as two propellers.

I was going to vomit, but I jumped into my chat as I heaved. Rocks started pinging off the airship's shield.

Warlord Carl: Florin and everyone in the 101st! Brace for a shockwave! Eruption is bigger than they said it would be! Elle, you too. Buckle down. Boomer, watch your heads!

"You guys okay?" I shouted at Skarn, who'd turned back to his chee shape.

"We're good," Bonnie said. She actually seemed okay, but I could see the fear in Skarn's eyes. Tears had formed.

Crack! That was a new sound, and it took a moment for me to realize what it was. It was Donut casting *Magic Missile*. With her tiara's advanced targeting skills and Donut's elevated position, along with her Deathbed Hellcat class, she could hit anything she could see with any of her long-range spells. It was louder than expected.

When we built the Nest tower, we could assign the tower's synergy to several different skills, spells, and classes. Originally, we planned on making it a straight-up sniper tower, which would greatly enhance Donut's ability to zero in on a target across the battlefield. But it turned out with her tiara, that was unnecessary. All Donut needed was line of sight to apply her sniper skills.

Which, in turn, allowed us to assign a different synergy to the tower.

The Nest was instead built to have synergy with something called Atrocity-class spells.

Donut had several, including her new one. *War Crime*.

It was the one part of today's plan I prayed we wouldn't have to use.

A dark plume of ash was starting to spread that was going to be a problem for everyone. And the lava flow would probably be more than the dwarves had anticipated, too.

"Carl!" Louis shouted as more rocks fell all around us. "I can fly with three props, but not well. I can quick repair it at base, but I gotta limp back through this chop. You guys better jump now. I see Elle's beacon."

Entering the realm of the Reavers.

You are at war with this team.

This airship is cloaked.

Cloaking has possibly been compromised.

"Okay!" I said. I turned to the kids. "When you get back to base, stay there this time. Do you understand?"

Skarn nodded, not saying anything.

Still, I grabbed him by the shoulder and leaned in. "Don't just stay at Area 52. Get back into the saferoom. And if you have any friends that aren't allowed in the saferoom, make sure they're in Larracos. Not Shanty Town. Larracos. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, and this time I believed him.

Carl: Elle, you good?

Elle: Oh, you know. I'm okay. The winding box got knocked over, and the watches fell out. The gate was already primed, so the gate

activated. Hurry your ass up. We got 20 minutes before it closes. A bunch of trees cracked but didn't fall. Who could've predicted activating a goddamned volcano could possibly spiral out of control? And just you wait. I went through this back in '80. We're all gonna be cleaning ash out of all our crevices for the next 99 years.

"Come on, Samantha!" I called. I looked out the door, searching for the large portal, but I couldn't see anything in the smoke.

Crack! Crack!

"Bye, Louis!" Samantha said. She zipped up and kissed him on the cheek. "Just so you know, nothing turns me on more than mass, faceless slaughter from above." She came to hover near me. Her hair was already ruined, and the "Fuck the Cheese Dicks" had smeared. Now all it said was "Fuck Cheese."

Donut: HEADSHOT!

I had my quarter splat fall protection, but I didn't trust it. I took a scroll of *Controlled Feather Fall* and read it.

"Stay safe!" I called at Louis before I activated my tech shield and jumped out the open door, followed soon by Samantha. *Party Planner* quickly disappeared above us as it angled around, heading back toward Area 52 to repair and reload.

As we fell, plunging through the smoke and rocks, some of which burned red-hot, multiple notifications came in quick succession.

The battlefield conditions have triggered a summoning! The Goddess of Chaos has been spontaneously summoned.

Eris has made an appearance in the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

System Message: A demon eviction event is occurring over multiple locations on the battlefield.

Florin: We got a demon event starting here. Missiles disabled the enemy armor's movement but not its teeth. Missiles, hit it again. Looks like Stalwart tried to teleport away, but the net stopped him. He might make a run for it. Donut, looks like we might need an atrocity or two in a minute.

Donut: SAY THE WORD, AND DEATH WILL RAIN IN MY NAME.

Before I could even parse all that, more notifications came.

The Throne Room of the Bone Clan is being occupied by forces from Team Retribution. If they can hold for six hours, the Bone Clan will be defeated!

The Throne Room of the Dream is being occupied by forces from Team Retribution. If they can hold for six hours, the Dream will be defeated!

Warlord Message. Sir Ferdinand of Team Retribution has proposed an emergency action item. “Gods that appear during Faction Wars don’t gotta go home right away. Uh, Juice Box told me to say a bunch of other stuff too but now I can’t remember it all. Something about outworlders, but you probably heard what she said. But she wanted me to also say that she promises it’ll be entertaining. So my proposal is that.”

This emergency action item request has been split into two requests. The first action item has been denied. All deity summoning rules will remain in effect as written for the ninth floor.

The second action item has been approved. Effective immediately, the following ascendency rules are applied. Ascendency players may no longer choose whether to pilot their sponsored deities should they be summoned off the 12th floor. Attendance is now mandatory. In addition, during gameplay summons, ascendency players may no longer choose to appear as themselves. All deities will appear as designed, and all sponsored deities will be piloted by their sponsors. Any summons currently in progress where the pilot stayed back because she was being a cowardly little chicken have been corrected.

“What the fuck,” I said out loud as I narrowly missed slamming into a tree. I slowed my descent and landed hard in the woods, Samantha floating next to me. All around me, trees that still stood were starting to burn.

None of that was planned. Not the gods. Not Team Retribution getting to those two throne rooms, and especially not that action item. I looked frantically on my map, and I saw a blue dot about two hundred meters away with the already-activated portal right next to her. Elle. She was waiting for me to get there. We would go through the gate and teleport ourselves to the Madness, leaving Samantha behind.

Elle: Jesus, Carl. You landed like a comet. I see you. Better get here quick. I just got a weird notification that someone had searched my

location and it canceled out my *Subterfuge* spell. Gotta wait a minute before I can cast it again.

Victory cracked into existence right next to me.

This was already so far off the rails, I didn't even startle at Victory's appearance.

Fire from the eruption continued to rain down. Luckily this was just regular, old-fashioned fire and not Sheol fire. Victory said nothing at first. She just looked down at me, arms crossed, a grim look on her face. I was about to say something snarky, but she held up her hand.

"Just so you know, we only learned about this like five minutes ago," she said. "None of the adjutants had any idea. We tried to stop it, but apparently the AI says it's out of its hands."

"What are you talking about?"

Florin: Damnit! The anti-teleport net was breached. Stalwart teleported away!

Donut: I SAW HIM! DID I GET HIM?

Florin: I think you might've winged him just as he was teleporting, but I couldn't tell what was happening. He popped out the top of the tank covered with something.

Donut: HE LOOKED LIKE HE WAS FIGHTING HIS OWN GUYS!

Several dots suddenly appeared on the map, all enemies. They'd all teleported right to Elle's location and the portal.

Elle: Carl! Stalwart is here!

I ran toward the commotion, preparing to use my *Wraith Phase*. As I rushed forward, Elle flew past me, flying over my shoulder, having been tossed by a spell. I saw the **Unconscious** tag over her head. She hit a tree behind me with a sickening crack, and the tree toppled over.

"Samantha," I cried as I rushed forward. "Help her!"

I jumped into the clearing, quickly taking in the scene, confusion mounting. What the hell? Stalwart was here, on his knees, crying in pain. There were four corpses on the ground. War mages. The magical beings were dead and smoking. They'd all been hit and killed with Donut's amped-up *Magic Missile* before they'd all teleported here. Three more of the war mages surrounded Stalwart, shouting. A fourth stood off to the side.

Quickly-melting ice covered everything. Elle had managed a spell before she'd been taken out.

Even though they were all the same type of creature, they all looked like different monsters. They all had crackling, multi-hued glows around them. I knew more about war mages now than I had before the floor started, and the sight of so many in one place terrified me.

The one standing off to the side had the mark of colonel over his head, but as I watched, the designation faded away. And much to my surprise, their dots all turned white. And, even more surprisingly, the white dots took on a brownish-orange glow. Each army had its own color. The Princess Posse was pink. Nobody was this shade.

I examined the war mage. He looked much like the one whose head I had in my inventory: a long-haired elf, old and wizened with an angry sneer on his sagging face.

Akuma. War Mage. Level 100.

Leader of the War Mage Rebellion.

This was originally a high-elf cobbler with a human skin, resleeved 12 times before the ambient magic gave him his final form. He's arguably the most powerful non-god magic caster on this floor. He's also a complete prick, as evidenced by the company he keeps.

Want to know some interesting trivia about war mages? These guys have been around since the very early days of *Dungeon Crawler World*, but they are one of the few, true dungeon-born entities. They weren't dreamed up by a sweaty, caffeine-addled writer, nor were they developed by one of my kind. They just sort of happened, a result of too many combatants having access to *You're Not Done Yet*.

The final form a war mage takes is entirely dependent on the combination of its first two forms, in this case, a human crawler from a very long time ago and a high elf. The skin of a corpse is ripped off of a body and turned to a creature named a flesher. The flesher then consumes a living being, melting the original skin off and re-sleeving the creature. The flesher casts *Boned*, reanimating the skeleton, and the two become a symbiote.

Symbiotes are extremely attractive targets to other fleshers. And because young symbiotes are slow and awkward, they are oftentimes quickly re-sleeved by fresh fleshers. Each iteration results in a more powerful being.

It's rare for a symbiote to be resleeved at least a dozen times, but when it happens, the magic itself can become sapient. When this

happens, the flesh finally fuses to the reanimated skeleton, turning the three creatures—the skeleton, the flesher, and the sapient well of magic—into a single being. A war mage.

This process usually takes at least 12 iterations, but there's no hard rule about it. Sometimes it takes up to 15 or 16 iterations. It depends on the latent magic in the skin of the fleshers.

War mages come with knowledge of hundreds of spells.

They're also all complete dicks. If they ever made action figures of these things, their accessories would include keys to a BMW, a few bumps of cocaine, and a membership card to some secret club where you can hunt homeless people for fun.

If these things were non-corporeal, they'd be called magic elementals. Instead, they're just grumpy, lumpy assholes who get their rocks off by showing just how unpleasant they can be. The very nature of most magic spells is cold cruelty, and that shows when the magic itself is allowed to talk.

And nobody made them! All of this just happened on its own. In fact, the very existence of these things has actually been the focus of multiple, boring-ass studies and books. But, in the end, because they were “born” in the dungeon, they are of the dungeon, and just because nobody engineered their existence doesn't mean that existence hasn't been exploited, as evidenced by the fact most war mages find their minds wiped and themselves sitting in quests or mercenary guilds each time a new dungeon opens.

However, their very existence also creates problems. Each war mage one may find in the dungeon was created naturally, meaning they could have been made several seasons previous, and because the showrunners like to use war mages, especially for their precious Faction Wars, they are rarely recycled.

So here's a message for all the assholes reading this. If you can't see why that's a problem, maybe you should ask that pissed-off changeling army that's in the middle of wrecking your shit why you should probably keep an eye on the things you unleash, especially when you don't fully understand what they are.

Oh, by the way.

War mage heads explode and create something called a Sapient Moment of Destruction approximately ten minutes after they die. So,

heads up. Pun intended.

As I watched in horror, the three war mages surrounding Stalwart each chanted something in unison, and the orc's flesh began to tear.

I met eyes with the terrified orc for just a moment.

"My sister was right," King Stalwart, leader of the Skull Empire, said in the moment before he exploded right in front of me, showering the clearing with his gore.

The four mages didn't move to attack me.

For the first time, I saw what was in the hands of Akuma, the leader of this group.

He had taken the Gate of the Feral Gods from Elle.

The war mage was staring at my bare feet.

"Nice shoes, asshole," he said to me before the four of them teleported away.

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BEHIND ME, ELLE GROANED AS SHE WOKE FROM HER UNCONSCIOUS STATE. Samantha had stayed behind me and was clucking over her.

System Message: War Chief Stalwart of the Bone Clan has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to three members of the War Mage Rebellion.

System Message: The War Mage Rebellion is not an active team. As per the current season's rules, the team currently occupying the Bone Clan's throne room, Team Retribution, will be awarded all their assets. Sections one and two are not connected to Larracos. As such, the King's Point throne room remains a capturable asset. Yes, even though the castle itself just blew up. The throne room is still there.

Elle: Sorry guys. That war mage prick snatched the gate right out of my hands.

Donut: I DID HIT HIM WHEN I SHOT! I GOT PARTIAL CREDIT FOR KILLING STALWART, BUT THEY DIDN'T SAY IT! THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!

I rushed over to Elle. "Are you okay?" Rock pieces continued to rain from the sky, landing all around us like burning hail. I kept my tech shield on.

She rubbed her head. "I'm okay. My pride is hurt more than anything. What the hell was all that about?"

“I don’t know,” I said, looking around. Several of the trees were on fire. “We don’t need the gate anymore. We should get moving. We’ll be caught in this fire soon.”

“I need a moment,” Elle said, still panting. “Damn, I haven’t been walloped like that since my bachelorette party.”

Samantha laughed. I did not.

I helped the small figure up. She still felt ice cold when I touched her, but now there was a gritty, electric feeling when I touched her skin. I lifted her up like a child, and she remained floating in the air. I was reminded of the first time I’d lifted her, so long ago during the rage elemental attack on the second floor.

The fairy crawler still had a dazed look to her eyes. “Carl, they could’ve killed me. That strong one, the elf-looking guy. He pulled back at the last moment. It was almost like he was trying *not* to kill me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The mage guy was a dick, but his dot turned white. I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know their intentions. Did you see? The system said they have a team name and everything, but they’re not an official team.”

“That’s what I was talking about,” Victory said, her eyes flashing as she spoke. I’d forgotten she was standing there. “We just received notification that there’s a new, non-team entity called the War Mage Rebellion. I still don’t know what that even means. ‘Non-team entity’ is not a thing. At least it wasn’t until just now.”

“Carl, collect the bodies,” Elle said. “They said the heads explode.”

“Shit, you’re right.” I went about and collected the four war mage bodies. There was nothing left of Stalwart to collect. He had several magical items on him, which were scattered on the ground in front of the portal, but nothing truly amazing that I could see, which was interesting. I’d examine it all later.

The bodies all appeared in the **Graveyard** section of my inventory, which was now almost empty.

“War mages are always up to something tricky,” Samantha muttered as she examined the open, crackling portal. “They’re just mad because nobody likes them.” She seemed nervous as she floated near the gate. She continued to mutter under her breath.

The ground rumbled, and the distant voice of Meatus washed over us. “Stay out of this, Eris!”

This was followed by a psychotic, female laugh that instantly sounded familiar. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” the same voice said a moment later. “I said I didn’t want to come down to other floors! How do I eject? Get me out of here!” She laughed again, and it sounded even crazier. “I’m not the one laughing. Stop! Stop!”

Katia: Oh my god, did you hear that? That goddess sounds just like Hekla.

Mordecai: That’s Eris, the goddess of chaos. She’s being driven by someone new this year. I don’t know who it is, but it sounds like she just got sucked back into the goddess’s body after that new rule was called.

Rosetta: Eris is sponsored by Nami. A model and influencer. She outbid the Priory, who usually has a different priestess pilot Eris each season. Nami sounds like that old crawler because she had surgery to make herself look and sound just like her. It’s a thing. Eris herself looks a little like that crawler as well.

Donut: OMG IS THERE ONE OF ME?

Rosetta: They usually wait until the person is dead.

Florin: We need to figure out if we’re being fucked by the NPCs or not. I am toe to toe with a big force that’s now under NPC orders, and we don’t know if we’re supposed to be fighting them or not. I’m pretty sure they don’t know, either. We got demons popping up everywhere, trying to take over the corpses, and we got our hands full either way. That mountain is leaking pretty bad, too. We got flaming, ute-sized rocks raining on us. It sounds like it’s flowing lava right into the river bed which is gonna find its way down here pretty quick. I hope that this “Lava abatement team” knows what they’re doing because it’s going to roil right into Larracos.

Donut: WHAT THE HECK IS A ‘UTE’?

Carl: The alliance is still intact. At least on paper. The system will automatically break the alliance if they do something against us. I think.

Justice Light: You lost the gate? Where did it go? We need that back! *I* need it!

Carl: The war mages took it. They teleported away with it! Britney, what the hell is happening with the NPCs?

Britney: I don’t know! Juice Box teleported away!

Donut: FERDINAND SAYS TO WAIT A MINUTE BECAUSE THEY'RE IN TROUBLE WITH THE ADJUTANTS.

Britney: Okay, hang on. Juice Box sent a message. She says to keep the plan rolling. She and Ferdinand have to answer some questions.

Carl: Yeah, she has to answer some questions, all right. Jesus. If she's still planning on meeting us at the Madness castle, tell her I want her assurances that this plan at least is going to go as planned.

Next to me, Victory was still there, but her eyes continued to flash. "Hang on, Carl," she said. "Drick just called foul against his own team. I'm still gathering details. We might be able to sue to get the gate pieces back."

"Just tell me what the hell is happening, and quickly," I said, eyeing the gate nervously. Elle had accidentally opened it when the volcano blew. The portal would only last twenty minutes, and it had been open already for at least ten. There was no visible timer, even when I examined it. At least the war mages hadn't teleported away by walking through the gate. The gate was opened to spot number eight, the woods above the Madness's castle. The plan was for me and Elle to go through it, and then I'd use a standard teleport trap to escape back to Shanty Town when we were done. We weren't going to use the Feral God gate a third time unless we absolutely had to, so we didn't *need* the gate anymore.

No matter what happened, when this portal here timed out, a feral god was still going to escape right where we were now standing, so we had to get moving.

It was only then I realized Justice Light, in his panic, had said he needed the gate. I didn't know why, or how he'd planned on getting it. *Goddamn it*, I thought. This was just like with Rosetta earlier when she'd attacked King Rust. Just like with Juice Box and the NPCs making dangerous moves without telling us. People were making plans without communicating them, and they were using *me* as part of it.

You're always on rails, she said. Shi Maria's voice wasn't as loud as when the floor first started, but I could hear her, down there under the surface of the fast-moving water. It was no longer a river at this point, but a constant, never-ending torrent. And it wasn't water. It had never been water. I feared touching it, lest it rip me away. *You're a puppet, dancing on their stage. I'm still here. You just need to untie me.*

"Okay," Victory said. "As far as I can tell, it appears the War Mages broke their own allegiance against the Skull Empire, which they shouldn't

be able to do. They were under strict *Conscription* rules, but they used a clever combination of *Pull* spells to kill Stalwart anyway. I think Stalwart might've ejected them from his army on purpose in an attempt to get them to stop hurting him. It didn't work. But after they killed him, they immediately teleported themselves to Juice Box and Ferdinand for unknown reasons. Drick has called a foul, and I'm not certain why. I think he's claiming illegal interference, similar to what I would've called on you if you'd allowed Prepotente to fight on your behalf before he joined up. It's a bit shaky unless Drick can prove this so-called War Mage Rebellion has been talking with Juice Box this whole time. And even then, if they're considered an independent entity, I don't think it's going to stick. They've called a full quorum, so I'm going to the hearing." And then she unceremoniously teleported away.

Edgar: Donut, I see Epitome Tagg. He is still near the Dream castle. He did not teleport with his army. He's with a small contingent of his troops, riding zebras. I think he's fleeing into the woods. I marked him. He is *not* the one in the fancy hat. They are trying to trick you.

Donut: I CAN'T SEE THEM. I DON'T HAVE A SHOT. THE NEW GODDESS LADY IS IN THE WAY. I DO LIKE HER JACKET THOUGH. IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING FROM BEETLEJUICE, THOUGH THE SHOULDER PADS ARE A LITTLE TOO GAUCHE. SLEDGIE, WILL YOU BE A DEAR AND FIRE SOME MISSILES AT HIM WHILE HE'S STILL MARKED? MAYBE FIRE SOME OF THE FAST MOVERS ALONG WITH A CHAIN RIPPER?

Sledge: I kill for a living.

If Tagg was fleeing, that meant they were giving up—at least for now—on taking back their throne room. But three gods were rolling around their territory, and maybe they were gambling on the gods forcing the occupying Team Retribution to flee. Tagg was making the safe choice to flee and hide, effectively abandoning his own troops who he sent to attack our base.

The mark would only last a few minutes. Tagg wasn't dumb. He would probably get away for now, despite the missiles.

More reports flooded in. Tran had taken heavy losses from the magical artillery even though they hadn't engaged anyone directly. There was heavy fighting at the FUPA against the Dreamers, along with demon eviction starting there as well, like we anticipated. Louis had already docked back at Area 52 and unloaded the kids. He used a precious *Emergency Repair* scroll

to speed up the repair of *Party Planner* and was about to start his second run as soon as they finished reloading the bomb bay.

There was still no sign of the bulk of the Madness or Reaver forces.

Boomer: Starting our raid on the Reaver castle. Bomo and Sledge. Initiate the barrage.

Sledge: Robots go boom.

“Okay, I’m good,” Elle said, shaking her head. “Let me cast my *Subterfuge* spell again so they don’t spot us. We need to keep this rolling.” She patted me on the shoulder. “Ready to finally get your hands dirty?”

“Samantha,” I said as we moved to the portal. “Okay, you’re on your own. The gate is going to take a few minutes longer than we planned to close because we won’t be bringing the pieces through. Stay close, but not too close. Boomer is in your chat, and he’ll tell you where to go if the feral god chases you. Okay?”

But she wasn’t paying attention. She was looking straight up into the smoky sky. “Ohhh, I know what that is,” she said just as we stepped through. “That’s a dragon!”

ENTERING THE TERRITORY OF THE MADNESS.

You are at war with this team.

Your platoon member, General Elle McGib has cast a *Subterfuge* spell, and your presence is hidden from enemy eyes. Do not venture from the area of the spell, or the Madness will be automatically warned of your incursion.

The spell would hide us, but that goddamned, shining portal had just been sitting here for ten minutes straight. It was dark, and it was in the woods, but if we were unlucky, someone could've spotted it. I was half expecting to find a battalion sitting here waiting for us. Luckily, there was nothing.

The first thing I did was send a message warning Louis about the dragon circling the Reaver castle, which I still hadn't seen. Samantha was already in the chat talking to Louis about it.

We landed right at the edge of the woods, which was the closest we could conceivably get without them immediately knowing we were there. The flat prairies of the Madness spread out in front of us in the night. I couldn't see the castle in the dark, but it was there, about five kilometers away. The ground ahead glittered with literally thousands of traps that twinkled like a tapestry of stars. I could see alarm traps, hidden alarm traps, teleport traps, and lots of summons, which wasn't good. Both monster

summons and guard summons. *Tripper* would activate the summons, and we'd be neck-deep in soldiers.

"Get that disgusting thing away from me!" a voice boomed across the realm. That was Eris again. This fight was much closer now, but still not close enough to activate my Scavenger's Daughter patch.

This was followed by a wet coughing, sputtering sound from Meatus.

Donut: THE DREAM CASTLE JUST COLLAPSED!

I was expecting a notification that the NPCs occupying the Dream throne room had been cast away, but it never came, meaning whoever was holding the throne room was riding it out with this whole three-way god fight happening right on their heads.

I returned my attention to the minefield in front of us. The traps sparkled. I figured this would happen, but I hadn't expected the coverage to be this thick. We'd have to pick our way carefully across the landscape, which would slow us down. I would collect any summon traps I came across. A still-activated *Summon Guard* trap was a dangerous liability for the person attached to the other side of that trap, and Justice Light had taught me a really nasty trick with them.

From my inventory, I started to pull the teleport automatons with the second half of the teleport trap on them. I thought for a moment, and then decided to put most away for now, only keeping the Katia, Imani, Holger, and Splash Zone ones out. The traps here were too thick for a larger force. I'd have to risk being underpowered until we got closer to the castle. I sent a message to those four, telling them to come in.

Samantha: IT'S A BLEACHED DRAKE. THEY'RE VERY CUTE PETS. THIS IS A BIG ONE. THEY HAVE GRAVITY MAGIC.

Louis: Uh, gravity magic?

Samantha: OH, YES. YOUR AIR SHIP THING IS PROBABLY GOING TO GET TOSSED TO THE GROUND AND SMUSHED LIKE A CAN OF LOUIS-FLAVORED SOUP. YOU SHOULD ABANDON ALL THIS AND COME HELP ME FIGHT GASH WHEN SHE GETS HERE. THE LAST TIME I TEAMED UP WITH A BOYFRIEND, WE DEFEATED THE DEMON SLUT EASILY.

Carl: Does anyone besides Samantha have eyes on this dragon thing?

Donut: I CAN ONLY BARELY SEE IT, BUT THE MARK THING DOESN'T WORK. I CAN STILL TRY TO SHOOT IT DOWN, BUT

IT'S AT THE VERY EDGE OF MY RANGE, AND IT'S MOVING FAST. IT HAS SOME SPELL ON IT THAT MAKES IT LOOK BLURRY.

Baroness Victory: *Paint the Target* has a distance limit. It's not just line of sight.

Donut: WELL, THAT'S A STUPID RULE. I'LL TRY TO SHOOT IT. AND AREN'T YOU IN A MEETING?

Baroness Victory: Your boyfriend is holding up the adjudication. We're waiting for Drick to get him out of the rafters. Literally.

Donut: HE'S NOT MY BOYFRIEND.

Carl: Louis, are you in the air yet?

Louis: Just about to take off. I replaced the door gunners with two folks from Bucket Boy's clinic.

Carl: Okay, good. But I don't want you near that dragon. Swing toward Boomer's position instead and back him up. Don't approach the Reaver castle until we've dealt with the dragon.

The next message came over my private band.

Colonel Boomer: Warlord. We need those bombs dropped. We don't have No Disassemble missiles to kill their electronics. If you call General Louis off his run, that puts the rest of us in danger. I know he's your friend. But we can't do this without air support. He's a good pilot. He knows what he's doing. And with all due respect, you handed operational command over to Rosetta after you put me in charge of the Reaver assault. You need to focus on your own operation, not mine. I'll try to get close enough to mark the dragon for a missile barrage, but you can't call off his run just because it's dangerous.

Goddamnit. He was right, and I knew it. I took a breath and sent him an apology.

Carl: Louis, belay my last order. Proceed with the plan. Just... just be careful. You have four anti-air missiles. Save them for the dragon. We'll try to get someone who can see through the clouds with a *Paint the Target* spell so we can target it with the long range missiles. You might be able to paint it yourself on approach. This is Boomer's op and listen to him from now on.

There was a long pause.

Louis: Okay, Carl. Taking off now.

A moment later Bomo messaged that the missiles aimed at Epitome Tagg missed. That meant Donut's target was in the wind, and we'd have to hunt him down. Even if the NPCs managed to take his throne room and eliminate the Dream, he'd still be alive. That just wouldn't do, but there was nothing we could do about it right now.

Sledge: Missiles incoming Reaver castle.

Donut: MAYBE THOSE MISSILES HEADED FOR THE REAVER CASTLE WILL HIT THAT DRAGON THING BECAUSE I CAN'T.

That was unlikely. The targeted missiles would literally swerve around the dragon to hit the castle. That was how they were designed.

Florin: With Stalwart dead and demon eviction waning, 101st is at mission accomplished. Two squads are going to assist with lava abatement but the bulk is falling back to Shanty Town. We need to talk to the NPC general about all these off-worlders they just inherited. I don't think they know what to do with them, and I'm afraid Juice Box is just going to order them all killed.

Rosetta: Okay, Florin. Good work so far. Standby for further orders.

Across from me, the teleport traps activated. Katia, Imani, and Splash Zone appeared. The last trap, the one that was supposed to summon Holger, did not summon the were-castor. Instead, it was Dong Quixote. And not just Dong, but he was mounted upon the large swamp yak thing that had once belonged to King Rust. Gonk.

Dong had his crust sock slung over his shoulder, and he also had another weapon stowed vertically in a leather, holster-like sleeve hanging off the saddle: a glowing, enormously long war lance. Upon the tip of the lance, a flag waved. It was a flag from the 104th Naughty Little Piggies, where I'd reassigned him for this battle.

"What the hell?" I asked, double-checking my inventory. Dong was not supposed to be here.

And to my utter astonishment, yet another figure also appeared, also mounted on the back of the yak. This was Bigs the sluggalette. The one who'd killed Vinata. Since I'd last seen her, her face/eye paint had changed. She now had a massive teardrop built into the stalk of her right eye alongside the row of piercings. The hatchet protruding from her head

gleamed. She leapt off the back of Gonk and splotted into the woods with a loud whoop. She waved the axe. “Imma get my chop on today. Where the bad guys at?”

“Seriously, what the hell?” I asked for a second time.

Dong gave me a sheepish smile. “Holger didn’t want to leave little Clint and Tina and the other kids. They’re all scared because of the fighting at the castle, and Holger promised to protect them. Miss Nadine, too, who Holger is a little sweet on, I think, now that she’s not a caterpillar anymore. He gave me his half of the teleport trap. Bigs here was talking to another slug, and that one said that Justice Light taught them that if a mount utilizes a teleport trap, the entire mount and all its riders make it through.” Dong turned his head to the side. “Yes, yes. You’re right, Jefferson. It is very cost effective.”

I was annoyed. My operation hadn’t even started yet, and it was already in trouble. “I called Holger in because he’s small. We need to pick our way through a literal minefield. You’re gonna have to leave Gonk here.”

Gonk let out a derisive snort.

Dong slapped the reins, and Gonk danced sideways like a show horse. The saddled lance stayed straight upward.

“Warlord, I will have you know I am an expert yakman. Gonk here has an exceptionally light touch and is a very fine mount, which is why the orc war chief used her. We will not be a problem. I daresay we will have a lighter touch on the battlefield than you will.”

I doubted that, and I was about to object, but I was interrupted by messages I couldn’t ignore. I held up a hand.

Sledge: Missiles hit Reaver castle. Lots blow up just before hit. Don’t know damage.

Donut: THE MISSILES DIDN’T HIT THE DRAGON THING. I TRIED SHOOTING AGAIN, BUT IT’S NOT WORKING. ROSETTA NEEDS ME TO KILL SOME TROLLS AT THE FOOP, SO I CAN’T HELP ANYMORE.

I reread the message from Sledge and thought again of Louis. I had a probably-terrible idea. I sent a message to the already-exasperated Boomer, and he grudgingly agreed to let me try it.

Carl: Samantha, can you still see the dragon?

Samantha: YES. HE’S FLYING IN CIRCLES. HE’S VERY MAD BECAUSE SOME OF THOSE MISSILES HIT THE CASTLE. I

THINK HE MIGHT'VE STOPPED SOME OF THEM. IT'S STILL STANDING THOUGH. CARL, NOBODY HAS COME THROUGH THIS STUPID GATE YET. TYPICAL GASH. ALWAYS SHOWING UP LATE. SHE AND I HAVE A SCORE TO SETTLE, AND I'M GOING TO ROCK HER WORLD.

Carl: Okay, I'm going to make you an officer. When I do that, it's going to give you a spell called *Paint the Target*. I need you to cast the spell on the dragon. Then when it's done, tell Bomo and Sledge you've done it. And for god's sake, don't fight the thing that comes out the gate. Run where Boomer tells you to run.

Samantha: BOMO AND SLEDGE ARE BIG NERDS, AND I DON'T WANT TO BE SEEN TALKING TO THEM.

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. This is to help Louis. Will you do it?

Samantha: OH ALL RIGHT.

"Christ, Carl. Can you stop trying to control everyone else's operation so we can get on with our own suicide mission now?" Elle asked. Next to her, Imani and Katia both crossed their arms in unison, looking at me. Splash Zone, seeing them all glaring also crossed his fuzzy arms in solidarity.

I grinned and held out my hands. "Old habits die hard. Let's get moving. Imani, help me with these traps. Only disarm the alarm ones. Let me deal with the summons." I moved into the Platoon menu and drew a map from our location to the back side of the Madness castle, marking all the trap locations. Now everybody would see them.

I took another look at Dong mounted on his yak and let out a sigh. "Stay right behind me, and stow that lance in your inventory. We're sneaking up, not charging in. There's an anti-invisibility shield that starts about a hundred meters from the castle wall. I want you invisible until then. Bigs, get back on the yak behind Dong. Don't leave and don't wander. If we hit a trap or if you leave the area of Elle's protection, they'll get a notification. We want to avoid a big fight. Bodi and Prepotente are way on the other side, coming up from Shanty Town right now with the 103rd, and we want the Madness defenders to focus on them while we sneak up."

I took a few steps, reached down, and stowed away a summon trap. I examined it. This trap would summon a single, specific guard to the location. I grabbed a second summon, and it did the same thing, but the trap was rendered inert because the associated guard was already dead. That was

good. That suggested these traps had likely been set long ago and weren't being carefully maintained.

A third trap summoned literal fire ants. *Ohhhh*, I thought, remembering the ants from the Iron Tangle that had eaten that conductor. I took that one as well.

Samantha: THE GATE TIMED OUT. IT'S ALL CRACKLY AND SPARKLY.

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. You're not supposed to be right in front of it! Get moving!

Samantha: I CAN TAKE THE BITCH.

We'd hoped that Samantha's proximity to the gate would summon a Nothing demon that she could drag around the battlefield like a kite. Something to distract the Reavers for Boomer's assault. When those last two harem demon things came out—Slit, during the bubble levels and Minge during the fight at the Desperado Club—they'd both been laser focused on catching Samantha. If we could control the path of the demon's rampage, it would be an amazingly powerful weapon.

That this gate would actually summon one of the demon things because Samantha was nearby was only a hunch and was in no way guaranteed. Either way, if that thing caught Samantha, then her whole presence was pointless.

The Feral God Yarilo has entered the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Samantha: UH-OH.

Boomer: SAMANTHA START MOVING, KID! ANGLE TOWARD THE CASTLE, but not too close yet!

Samantha: YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME TWICE. THIS IS A GOD, NOT A DEMON. IT'S YARILO, AND HE DOESN'T LIKE ME! HE'S MAD BECAUSE HE THINKS I HELPED GET HIM TOSSED IN THE NOTHING IN THE FIRST PLACE. IT'S NOT MY FAULT HE'S SEXUALLY ATTRACTED TO ANIMALS. NO OFFENSE, KATIA.

A loud, androgynous voice bellowed across the realm.

“PSAMATHE! Are you here? We need to talk! Quick! Wait, don't run! By his left tit, stop running!”

And then, something very strange happened.

“Uh, what is that?” Splash Zone asked, pointing behind us. We all turned to look.

A funnel of prismatic light had burst into the air, blazing straight upward like a beacon. The beacon was so bright it pierced all the clouds. As we watched, it started to frantically wave back and forth like it was the universe's most powerful flashlight, and someone was shaking it.

This wasn't too far, maybe a mile away, deeper in the woods of the Madness territory.

The Scavenger's Daughter has blinked her eyes, but she does not know what she sees.

“What the hell...” I began.

Quest Update. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

You have been tasked with obtaining the item, Memorial Crystal: Apito. The crystal has just shown itself. Abandon your current task and obtain it.

“Yeah, that’s gonna have to wait a minute,” I said out loud. The crystal, as far as I was aware, was currently in the possession of the crawler Osvaldo, who had—so far—managed to avoid getting added to any army and was riding it out in the woods. Both myself and Prepotente had a quest to get that crystal. Our current raid was more important than whatever the hell this was, and I wasn’t about to force a fight with a crawler I didn’t even know. And even if I wanted to do it, I couldn’t just abandon the entire battalion marching up on the other side of the Madness castle. My plan was to talk to him when I got a chance.

Next to me, Elle shook her head. “You wanted chaos, Carl. If they didn’t know we were here before, they’re most definitely going to come check that out.”

Donut: WHY IS THERE A GIANT RAINBOW?

The light continued to shine and sparkle and shake.

“Do you see the trees?” Katia asked. “They’re getting taller where the light is shining through the forest canopy.”

“I think that’s the crawler Osvaldo,” I said, also peering at the strange light. I moved to my skills, checking *Find Crawler*.

“Osvaldo?” Elle asked. “I remember that fucker. I liked him until he decided to be a little coward and duck our recruiters. He has a whole group hiding out in the woods. He’s not doing a very good job of hiding anymore. Did he mess up a spell or something?”

I grunted, closing out the *Find Crawler* window. “Yeah, that’s him alright. He has something called a memorial crystal on him, and I’m pretty sure that’s what’s causing the light.”

“I remember that thing. That’s what he and Pony boy were fighting over at the end of the Butcher’s Masquerade,” Elle said. “That badger lady, too. Prepotente killed his pet. Why is it glowing?”

I told them about the message from Emberus as I continued to rapidly clear out a section of summon traps. There was a lot right here on the edge of the forest. “When someone gets tossed into the Nothing, and they escape, the god or goddess that comes to deal with them is usually the one who

banished them in the first place. Yarilo was banished because he ruined one of Apito's Butcher's Masquerade parties. And since Apito is both dead and not dead, it's some big dungeon mystery I think we're supposed to solve. This is all just another clue."

"Oh yeah, great timing," Elle said. "That 'clue' is going to make the enemy cast every observation spell they have in our direction at any moment."

Carl: Osvaldo, put that goddamned thing away!

Osvaldo: *Vai pra puta que pariu!* You don't think I'm trying?

Warning: This message has been delivered, but the log has been sent to your adjutant for review. Osvaldo is unaffiliated with the Princess Posse, and any planning may be construed as illegal corroboration.

Baroness Victory: Carl, I am very busy right now, but I'm not so busy that I won't call foul. Don't tempt me.

"Isn't Yarilo the god of lust?" Katia asked, still staring off at the prismatic beam of light shining straight up into the air. It continued to whip back and forth, like Osvaldo was waving it around. He obviously couldn't get it back into his inventory.

"Yeah," I said. "He's the god Samantha was pretending to be when she tricked that Mad Dune Mage guy into letting her escape the Nothing in the first place. So Yarilo probably does hate Samantha. We gotta get moving before we're found."

As if I'd jinxed myself, Elle cursed, and a notification appeared.

You have been observed! Subterfuge has been negated! The enemy is aware of your incursion!

Prepotente: Your army people are marching their way toward the castle, and it appears the plan is working. A large host of Madness troops have emerged and are coming to face us. However, it seems whichever one of you shot that giant rainbow in the air has attracted the other half of the Madness forces, and they are now coming to meet you. Who would've thought that such a move would alert the enemy? Carl, I suspect you're about to be in extreme danger.

I stood up and sighed. Next to me, Elle and Katia also stopped. They also saw the message.

"Plan B?" Katia asked.

“It’s not really Plan B if we don’t have the feral god gate,” Elle muttered. “Can we still summon the other half of the 105th?”

“We can,” I said. “But we don’t have the protection spells in place. Imani doesn’t have any real psionic protection, and that’s the one thing they keep warning us about these guys. We can retreat a small force easily, but not half a battalion. Prepotente can help protect them, but not until the 103rd on the other side of the castle retreats. He can’t be in both places at once.”

The 103rd battalion, currently about 10 kilometers away and marching on the castle from the opposite side, wasn’t supposed to actually engage the Madness troops. Of all the standing forces still active, the soldiers of the Madness were by far the most dangerous. The plan was to draw them out and then retreat. That would keep them away from their own castle while my much smaller force sneaked in.

We could protect ourselves against almost all of the horrific spells the Madness was known to cast, but not all of them at once. Prepotente could protect groups from their long-range psionic abilities, but he couldn’t be in two places at once. If I summoned the 105th to our location, we’d have to choose between having Pony cover the 103rd’s retreat or come here and back up the attackers. The group that wasn’t covered would be in trouble.

“We still have Donut to cover the 103rd as they retreat,” Katia said. “I say we have Prepotente come here and use Donut to the best of her ability.”

I felt a sinking sensation. “You’re right,” I finally said.

So much for sneaking into the Madness castle.

I started to pull the remaining teleport automatons as I sent out orders. These would bring 18 more people, and it was the original team for my assault. I also sent a message to Jurgen, telling him the new plan. He was the current leader of the 105th Scream Warriors, and his half-strength battalion would come help us.

Jurgen: Heidi and I are ready to fight. Will teleport to you on your command.

Juice Box herself was still in the adjudication last I heard. These things were like mini trials, but they still didn’t normally last this long. I’d summon her if she was free in time, but it sounded like we were doing this without her.

I then sent a message out to Prepotente, Donut, and Bodi—the current leader of the 103rd.

Carl: Bodi, I'm having you retreat early. Did you finish seeding the field? Prepotente, as soon as they start withdrawing, come to our side. Donut, once they start to fall back, wait for Bodi to tell you he's clear of the seeds, then do it.

Donut: OKAY, CARL.

Bodi: If Prepotente leaves that quickly, we will lose his psionic protections. We've been warned not to retreat without them.

Carl: I know. I am sorry. Do your best. Don't just fake retreat. Haul ass out of there.

Bodi: Very well. We are almost done seeding the field, and I will order the withdrawal.

Prepotente: I will come as requested, Carl.

"When are the missiles due to arrive?" Elle asked. "And how much time do we have?"

Both questions were answered just moments later as fire suddenly rained down from the heavens in front of us. Hundreds of missiles, all at once, fell upon the distant castle. A round, semi-circle sphere appeared, stuttered, and then flashed out. The shield. The missiles continued to pound into the distant stronghold, which was actually a low rectangle with no battlements. The whole thing looked so unassuming and small, now lit up by hundreds of fires. The missiles would continue to slow walk into the structure, keeping the shield down.

The fires around the castle backlit a large, fast-moving force riding in our direction upon hundreds of dune buggy-like carts, pushing over the dark fields. Marked notifications appeared as Elle started calling in cheese cutters, which were the anti-personnel, shrapnel-filled missiles. These were pretty much all the missiles we now had left after Bomo and Sledge's constant pounding of the Madness and Reaver castles.

It wouldn't be nearly enough. This was going to be a fight.

A strange calm settled over us all as we watched the massive force descend upon us.

"Well, that's not how this was supposed to go," I said.

THE LOUD *THWUM* OF THE 105TH SCREAM WARRIORS TELEPORTING INTO place filled the woods behind us. This was followed by a few screams as soldiers teleported into trees, despite the spell's supposed protection against that exact thing. In addition, their sudden appearance set off a few traps that had been sprinkled in the woods behind us, including four or five guard summons, which did not work out for the unfortunate Madness mercenaries who found themselves alone in the woods with 3,000 Princess Posse troopers staring at them.

Despite a small number of soldiers suddenly finding themselves half embedded in trees, all of them survived the journey. I knew it had to be a relief. They'd been forced to stand in place for hours and hours as the mages cast the grueling *Mass Teleportation* spell.

"Now that was a fuckin' trip," said a **level 60 Fire Dryad** everyone had been calling **Charmander**.

Jurgen landed to my left, the large, blond, barbarian man hitting the ground with a superhero pose.

"Jurgen and Heidi are here!" Jurgen cried, cracking his thick neck as he stood to his full height. He groaned as he arched his back.

All around me, the automatons started crunching as more of our soldiers teleported in individually. They were a diverse mix. Jamal, with his newly-enhanced and fortified legs, landed nearby and did a little hop. Bautista, irritated he hadn't been summoned as part of the first group, arrived and

started talking with Katia. Others included Gluteus Maxx and Doctor Bones, both from the Penis Parade, and Areson the large ogre. Also present were Chris and Clay-ton the cretin. Those last two had been inseparable this entire floor. These were the members of my team. The ones I'd planned on summoning as we approached the castle.

I watched as Imani walked up and gave Chris a quick hug using her wings, not her arms. Chris reached up, as if to touch her face, but stopped just short.

Ahead, the hundreds of troop-laden Madness dune buggies slowed at the sudden appearance of several thousand new soldiers. They came to a stop about a full kilometer away. They started firing flares and torch spells into the air, lighting up the smoky night sky. Shields started to glow all around the hastily-formed line of enemies.

"That's a lot of cheese sticks," Splash Zone muttered.

"More are probably coming, too," Elle said.

"Shields up!" I called. All around, multi-hued protections started to glow.

"Everyone," Imani called, raising her voice supernaturally as she flew up and down the forming line at the edge of the trees. "Keep an eye on the person to your left and to your right. The Madness is known for their mind magic. That and Atrocity magic. If you see someone acting unusual, call it out immediately. They won't always have a notification."

"Okay, Scream Warriors," Jurgen shouted. "You've trained for this. Wait for my or Heidi's command."

"Jamal is quite excited to battle with his new upgrades," the hammerhead shark said, taking my attention as more shields crackled into existence around us. His new legs whirled as he bounced up and down with excitement. "It is a very robust excitement that he has." He let out a little burst of flame from the new attachment on his underbelly. It was "Velma," Tserendolgor's flamethrower. Rosetta's team in the crafting room had modified it to fit his harness. "Oh. Please excuse Jamal and Velma."

"Jesus, Jamal. Be careful with that thing," I said.

"Jamal will only flame on purpose from now on. Rest assured, Mr. Carl. Any previous flamings were purely accidental and such a thing will never repeat."

The flamethrower reminded me of Rend, and I pulled him out as well. He landed in front of me with a loud, ominous giggle. He, too, now had an

upgrade, though his was much more subtle than a goddamned flamethrower attachment. Someone had donated a tooth cap, similar to the ones Mongo had for his sharp teeth, but this was designed for mounts. It was called **The Enchanted Tooth Cap of Hi-Yo Silver**. We installed it over his single, round tooth, making the tooth gleam silver. It allowed me to summon Rend to my position. It wasn't a teleport spell, but it had about a five kilometer range. The cooldown was only three minutes. When I summoned him, he'd get inexorably pulled toward me at great speed. If there was a wall in the way, he'd—possibly—smash through the wall. The skill was somewhat dangerous which was why Donut absolutely refused to put it on Mongo. But for Rend, it would work well, especially when combined with his new *Wrecking Ball* special ability.

The name of the upgrade, “Hi-Yo Silver” and not “Heigh-*Ho* Silver” had caused a great debate amongst some of the crawlers, especially Louis and Elle, and I thought they were actually going to come to blows over it. Louis insisted it was supposed to be “heigh-ho” while Elle told him to shove it. They'd been needling each other over it ever since. Since the phrase came from the old *Lone Ranger* television show, I was inclined to side with Elle on the matter—plus the AI who had named the upgrade in the first place, though if you'd asked me before this, I would've said the same thing as Louis.

The thoughts of this senseless debate filled my mind.

I sat on the ground and leaned my back against a tree. I'd never watched the *Lone Ranger* show. It was way before my time. I wondered if my dad had watched it. There was another show, called *The Rifleman* that I know he'd liked, but even that was old for him. I wondered if shows like that had been responsible for his love of western novels. Though, honestly, he'd pretty much stuck with Louis L'Amour books. I was the one who'd spread out to others like Zane Grey and Larry McMurtry, but once I'd discovered sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, those books took kind of a back seat for a while. And then I'd discovered some of the classics, the ones I should've read in high school but didn't, and I realized I would never, ever run out of books.

I thought of the Christmas present that was still sitting there, unopened in the common room. Neither Imani nor I had opened our presents yet. Mine was clearly a book, possibly two or three books, and I'd been hesitating to open them because I was afraid that...

Slap. You've been slapped awake. *Endless Thread of Distraction* has been dispelled.

Someone was shouting. It was Imani.

"Carl, they're targeting you. I can't hold it until Prepotente gets here. Carl, no! Keep your eyes open."

"Look at his finger!" someone else called. "That ring is glowing red!"

"Get his shirt! Cover that eye!"

Warning: Your Mind Balance is currently overwhelmed as you are getting absolutely hammered with psionic debuffs.

You've been infected with ten more instances of *Endless Thread of Distraction*.

You've been infected with *Self Harm*.

You've been infected with *Intrusive Thoughts*.

What am I even doing here? I thought. This is too much. I should've known this plan would never have worked, and now everyone under my command is going to die.

If I surrender, maybe they will let them live.

I felt the torrent under me. Not a river. It had never been a river. Voices. Screams. Nightmares distilled to light.

Souls.

And where was it flowing to? Down, was the answer. Always down. *Why are they always screaming?*

If the river made no sound, then why was it so loud?

It's so loud. It's so goddamned loud.

There was more shouting.

"He's stuck! Look at his feet!"

"Is it the tree? He didn't teleport, how can he be stuck in the tree?"

Carl. Steady yourself. You've done it before, and you can do it again. They think your mind is your biggest weakness, but it is the opposite. It is the rock upon which the rest of you is built.

Whose voice was that? That wasn't Shi Maria. Nor was it her husband. It was a familiar voice. Male. Friendly. A dwarf? I thought of tendrils worming their way through my body.

I can't do this. I'm going crazy.

No, Carl. This is the second time I've told you that you're not crazy. You're family now, after what you did. I will help you. Look. Look at your feet. You've been standing in this so-called river this whole time.

I looked down, and I was amazed at what I saw.

Your Mind Balance is now Level 16.

New Achievement! You now tread in the realm of gods!

You've trained a skill past 15 using battlefield conditions, as opposed to just taking a bunch of potions to do it. That's quite the accomplishment. I'd ramble on and on about this, but you're currently a babbling idiot with your bare feet buried in an All Tree root. So let's speed up this *Empire Strikes Back* cave scene bullshit and get back to the action.

***Reward:* The skill is the reward. The good news is this level-16 Mind Balance will now wake your ass up.**

Good, Carl. Good. She would be proud of you.

Who? I asked, but I snapped awake.

"He's awake!" Imani called, hovering over me, eyes wide with concern. "Carl, they're attacking you with every psionic attack they have! Prepotente is almost here, and he can shield you, but he says you need to cast *Wisp Armor*."

I stood, but I almost fell because my feet were stuck to the tree. I instinctively pulled, and my feet came away easily, the smell of mulch coming up. But there was rot, too. The tree upon which I'd been leaning was suddenly dead and withered. All around, soldiers shouted as the tree crumbled in on itself.

I whipped around to face the army that stood before us.

"Carl, cast *Wisp Armor*," Imani said again.

"No need," I said as the Emberus ring on my finger cooled. In my interface, dozens of mind-based spells crashed against me, but they didn't find purchase. I shook my head and grinned. Let them keep trying. None of that was going to work anymore.

I could now see them. The ones casting mind magic. That had come with my skill hitting 16. There were dozens of them, spread around the army before us. Mind mages. I started painting them, one by one, sending out orders to focus on them first.

Carl: Hit the mages I just painted. Reroute any incoming to these targets.

Bomo: These are the last missiles.

Carl: Okay. Do it. Good work today, both of you. Keep Donut safe.

“Are we doing this?” Jurgen asked. The large barbarian stood side-by-side with Jamal, who also quivered with excitement. Little tendrils of flame kept leaking from Jamal’s flamethrower. Rend was running in enthusiastic, babbling circles around the barbarian and hammerhead shark.

I held up my hand. “Wait for it.”

I quickly flipped through the messages as we waited. Louis would soon begin his bomb run on the Reaver castle but so far hadn’t engaged the dragon, which seemed content to circle above. Meanwhile, Boomer was pushing against the front door of the Reavers, waiting for Louis’s bombs. Their army still hadn’t appeared. Yarilo was chasing Samantha around in circles. She was heading toward the opposite side of the Reaver castle, much like we were marching on the backside of the Madness castle, but so far, Yarilo hadn’t actually done anything yet except call for Samantha to stop.

The Dream castle was utterly demolished, but the throne room was still—somehow—occupied by NPCs. Epitome Tagg was in the woods, presumably hiding while the three gods continued to fight in his territory. Apparently Meatus had wrapped his way around Eris and was using the influencer-stuck-in-the-body-of-the goddess of chaos as a battering ram against Harpocrates. Mordecai sent out a warning note that Eris’s spells could affect everyone in the realm at once, but she hadn’t yet cast anything.

Florin was making his way to Shanty Town with his battalion. Tran’s 102nd was rushing to the FUPA to help defend.

And speaking of the FUPA. The whole area was a mess. Demon eviction was ongoing, but it was mostly affecting the Dream soldiers, despite their overwhelming numbers. They were now sandwiched between the stronghold and a rising army of demon-infested corpses.

I moved my attention back to my own assault.

Carl: Bodi, report your status.

Bodi: We are withdrawing, but they are not pursuing. They appear to have abandoned their pursuit to face you instead.

Prepotente: This is correct. I will be to you in moments, Carl, and I will shield you and the rest of the force. I must warn you all a third force has appeared, emerging from under the castle. They, too, are coming to face you, Carl.

Donut: WHAT SHOULD I DO? YOU’RE NOT DONE YET ISN’T GOING TO WORK IF THERE ARE NO TARGETS. I CAN SNIPE

DURING YOUR FIGHT, BUT THE BACK SIDE OF THE MADNESS CASTLE IS JUST PAST MY RANGE FOR ATROCITY MAGIC. WE PUT THE DEAD BODIES ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE CASTLE!

Carl: That's okay. Stand down.

I'd asked most everyone to give their dead bodies from their graveyards to Bodi and the 103rd. The plan was for them to drop a metric fuckton of corpses on the battlefield and have Donut cast her wide-range, tower-enhanced, *You're Not Done Yet*, which would rip the skin off the corpses, creating literally thousands of fleshers, which would sail across the battlefield at the Madness forces, hopefully overwhelming them. But now the Madness forces had abandoned that battlefield in order to face me, we'd wasted all those corpses for nothing unless we wanted to get back out there and pick them back up.

Still, I decided that was probably a good thing. The last thing we needed was more War Mages getting made at this point.

Rosetta: Prepotente, be aware you have incoming friendly missiles to your airspace.

This was followed by a string of explosions walking their way across the line of dune buggies. Shields glowed and shattered on the Madness side as the Cheese Cutters went to work. More than half of the mages I'd marked were now just gone.

It wasn't enough. Still, the attacks against me suddenly ceased. Ahead, the Madness soldiers started to spread themselves out, not aware we were out of missiles.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING!" Meatus shouted in the distance.

"Leave me alone! Oh my god, this is so disgusting. Why can't I leave this place?" Eris shouted back. "Harpocrates, help me! Wait... wait..."

You are invulnerable until the completion of the Chaos Ritual.

Invulnerable? Chaos ritual? I looked down at the yellow radiance that had suddenly appeared over my body. All around, everyone suddenly had the same glow. Across the battlefield, I could see the enemy army glowed as well. It just came on all at once.

"What the shit?" Elle asked from my left.

What was going on?

Rosetta: Oh, fuck me. Comrades, hold on!

Warning. The Goddess Eris has cast *Bear Witness* in a wide area around her current position. This will only affect those outside of structures. The area of effect is marked on your map, but it's pretty much the whole floor.

Your Mind Balance has negated *Bear Witness*.

"What the hell is *Bear Witness*?" I asked, but all around me, everyone had frozen, like at the beginning of a boss battle. Elle, Imani, Katia. Everyone. Their eyes had gone completely white. I was not frozen. The notification **Witness** appeared over their heads, followed by a strange symbol I didn't recognize. It was two Cs back to back with a flaming lance through the middle.

The only people other than myself that didn't appear affected by the witness spell were Rend, Bigs the Sluggalette, Gonk the yak, Jamal the shark, and Dong Quixote.

I met eyes with the old stripper. "My goodness," was all Dong said.

Dong and I were the only awake ones with the invulnerable debuff. Jamal, Bigs, and Gonk did not have the glow.

"This is a most unexpected development," Jamal said.

Rosetta: Everyone. When you wake, you're going to be all mixed together. Find others from your team and run! If you have teleport escape, only use it if it's been an hour! I'll let you know if you can use it. Team leaders, report!

Tipid: I was inside the FOOP, but most of the defenders are just frozen! The Dream soldiers, too!

Kiwi: Tina! Where is Tina? Where is my daughter?

Tipid: I'm sorry, Kiwi. She got out and was fighting. I see her, and she's frozen.

Carl: What's wrong with them? What's happening? It's everyone here except me and the pets and a few others. Donut, are you okay?

Donut: I AM OKAY, BUT EVERYONE SURROUNDING THE TOWER IS FROZEN! SLEDGIE WAS STILL OUTSIDE AND IS STUCK BUT BOMO GOT IN AND IS OKAY!

Li Na: Most everyone in Shanty Town is affected. Those of us inside structures are fine. Li Jun is with me. Zhang was outside. Florin and the entirety of the 101st are affected. It appears anyone who was once a tattoo is unaffected. Same with the sluggalos.

Rosetta: Boomer, Tran, and Bodi aren't answering, either.

Jesus, I thought. That was almost everyone. If it reached all of Shanty Town and Florin, who was on the other side of the map, then it likely meant all the NPC soldiers inside of Larracos were frozen, too.

Samantha: I AM OKAY TOO. THAT ERIS BITCH CAN'T SUMMON ME. WHERE IS LOUIS.

Louis: The dragon thing is coming at me! Firing my anti-air missiles now!

Rosetta: Brace for part two of the ritual!

Before I could even ask what the hell part two was, a new notification came.

Warning: The Goddess Eris has cast *Bring Forth the Witnesses*.

Warning: The effects of a level-20 *Bring Forth the Witnesses* has caused a magical backlash over the entire floor. No long-range teleport spells will work for the next hour.

"Oof" I cried as I was bowled over by Jurgen's large form. Everyone in the army just rocketed up into the air like they'd all been launched out of trebuchets. The frozen witnesses ascended into the air and disappeared like it was the goddamned rapture.

Across the battlefield, the Madness soldiers also rapidly floated up into the air, abandoning their carts.

A figure appeared. Bianca the goat dragon landed next to me. Prepotente was not on her back. The thing screamed in fury and jumped up and down, her feet catching the foliage alight. She hissed at me and howled in outrage.

"I don't know where he went!" I said to the pissed-off demon as I pulled myself up. I was trying not to let the panic overwhelm me. "I think he got brought to Eris, the goddess. She's by the Dream castle fighting a giant penis and another god."

Bianca clicked and hissed with rage.

I pointed southeast.

"That way," I added.

She angrily chittered again and then burst back into the air, leaving a line of fire on the ground.

"A most unexpected development indeed," Jamal added.

CARL: TELL US EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS GODDAMNED RITUAL THING.

Mordecai: Okay. This is exclusive to Eris, and she usually does this on the 12th floor. I'm not sure why she did it now, but it sounds like she's panic casting things and doesn't know what she's doing. Some gods can only claim the Ascendent throne if there are no mortals present, so Eris sometimes causes chaos by summoning mortal witnesses to the ceremony. It's called the Ceremony of Chaos. The witnesses are protected from the gods during this, hence the invulnerability, and she can keep them in the Witness state as long as she wants. She can also turn the invulnerability off early if she wants. They're brought to her in a giant pile. It's... it's a thing. They're usually NPCs since most crawlers never make it to the 12th floor. She can only cast this once. Ever.

Carl: Wait, so everyone that just got summoned is now in a giant pile?

Donut: I CAN SEE THEM. THEY ARE IN A GIANT PILE, CARL! IT'S THOUSANDS OF THOUSAND OF PEOPLE, ALL MIXED UP ON THE GROUND NEXT TO THE DREAM CASTLE. KATIA AND ELLE AND IMANI AND BAUTISTA AND CHRIS AND SLEDGIE AND FLORIN AND ZHANG ARE IN THERE SOMEWHERE! THE RAINBOW IS THERE, TOO! IT'S JUST SHINING UP OUT OF THE PILE! AND THEY'RE ALL MIXED IN WITH BAD GUYS! I THINK

THE WHOLE REAVER ARMY IS THERE, TOO! WEREN'T THEY MISSING?

Carl: Holy shit. When they all wake up, it's going to be a slaughter!

Rosetta: They *are* awake. They are witnesses. They can see, but they cannot move. They can't use the chat. The witness state is mind magic. These god fights can take a long time, and we don't know when this Eris goddess will get her wits about her to turn the Witness state off.

Donut: CARL, CARL I THINK SHE MESSED UP THE SPELL. THAT FERAL GOD, MEATUS, HE'S INVULNERABLE NOW TOO! SHE ACCIDENTALLY MADE HIM INDESTRUCTIBLE!

Rosetta: Oh, gods. If she realizes what she's done, she might turn just the invulnerability off. If she does that, everyone in the pile will remain frozen but will lose their safety. Most of them *will* get crushed to death, or they'll suffocate!

A chill washed over me. What a goddamned nightmare. If we didn't free them before the invulnerability turned off, it was going to be absolute chaos. I needed to get there as quickly as possible and start pulling people free.

But it was *thousands* of people. Tens of thousands. By my estimates, maybe *80,000* people. The numbers were insane.

Half-formed ideas came at me, one after another. If I put a bomb in the middle of the pile, it would scatter them about. But it would have to be a huge bomb. Not the Doomsday Scenario, as that was too huge. And I had to get there. Teleport was temporarily broken. *Think, think, think.*

Carl: Donut, do *you* have the invulnerability buff right now?

Donut: I DON'T! WHY, DO YOU?

Carl: Yes. I think only those who were outside have it. It's just me and Dong. Jamal and Bigs don't have it. I'm going to have to abandon this and get over there.

Donut: I HAVE A BETTER IDEA. FINISH YOUR MISSION, CARL. LET ME DEAL WITH THE PILE. WE NEED TO GET THEM AWAY FROM THERE.

Carl: What's your idea?

Samantha: LOUIS, WATCH OUT!

Louis: I'm going down!

I immediately moved to the other chat.

Carl: Louis, report! Report!

Louis: A little busy now, Carl. Feather falling... *Party Planner* is dead. Ripped in half... Hit the dragon with missiles, and it just pissed it off... It cast a spell, and I tried to dodge. It ripped *Party Planner* down the middle. Dropped the bombs before they were armed. I'm sorry... They didn't go off. I'm falling through the air right now. Gonna land right on the Reaver castle... I think my door gunners are dead... Glad Bonnie and Skarn weren't here... He was right... That cop's husband. I'm sorry... The feral god is still there a mile west of the castle. I see him just sitting there. Dragon still flying above... I'm going to hit the castle by myself. Tell Katia when she wakes up that I'm sorry to be such a fuckup... I just sent a message to Juice Box, too, but she's still in that meeting.

Carl: You're okay. You're okay. When you hit the ground, get out of there and hide. You can't teleport, but you have lots of spells. Use your cloud attack and those smoke grenades I gave you.

Louis: I have a notification that tells me I'm being tracked by Reaver security. I'm fucked, Carl. I'm landing right in the middle of their castle.

Carl: Samantha, go save Louis!

Samantha: ON IT, CARL. THIS YARILO WEIRDO JUST GAVE UP CHASING ME ANYWAY LIKE A BIG WUSSY. GOD OF LUST? I DON'T THINK SO. HE'S THE GOD OF BEING A PERVERTED LITTLE BITCH. MAYBE IF I DRESSED UP LIKE A SLUTTY HAMSTER HE'D KEEP CHASING ME. I WOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITH HIM AGAIN ANYWAY. PROBABLY NOT.

I took a deep breath. There was nothing I could do for Louis right now. He would be okay, I kept telling myself. I needed to focus.

"Carl," Dong said. "Jefferson and I have been talking, and I believe he is correct. We should seize this opportunity and make haste to the Madness castle while the enemy army is gone. They likely do not know we are here, and we can proceed with the plan."

"Yeah!" Bigs announced from the back of Gonk. "We can take them!"

Jamal did a little jump and expelled a gout of flame.

I was torn. They were right. Plus, if one more warlord fell then the final phase would begin. I felt numb and sick. It had all happened so fast. One moment, we were facing the army, and in seconds, everything had changed.

I came to a decision. I needed to focus and trust the others. I couldn't do anything about Louis. I couldn't do anything about the others at the Dream castle. But I could do something about the castle right in front of me right now. Donut, Rosetta, and Mordecai were smart. I was sure they could come up with a sound plan to help as many people as possible.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed an atrocity.

Donut: WELL, I NEVER. THAT WAS VERY RUDE.

Carl: What was that?

Donut: IT'S A TWO-PART PLAN. FIRST I GOTTA MOVE THE PILE TO WHERE ALL THE DEAD BODIES ARE PILED. IT'LL GET THEM AWAY FROM THE GOD FIGHT, TOO.

A horrible realization dawned on me. I felt sick. I knew exactly what she'd just cast.

Carl: Holy shit, Donut.

Donut: UH, WHOOPS. THAT WAS UNEXPECTED.

Carl: What, what?

Donut: MEATUS GOT PULLED IN, TOO! AND SINCE HE IS STILL WRAPPED AROUND ERIS, SHE'S ALSO PART OF IT! IT SAYS THE GODDESS IS UNCONSCIOUS! HOW CAN A GODDESS BE UNCONSCIOUS? NOW HARPOCRATES IS TRYING TO HIT THE BALL! BUT HE'S AFRAID OF THE RAINBOW FOR SOME REASON. THE RAINBOW LIGHT IS JUST SHINING STRAIGHT UP IN THE AIR, BUT IT'S STROBING NOW LIKE A DISCO LIGHT. THE BASE PART END OF THE WIENER IS HANGING OUT OF THE BALL AT THE OTHER SIDE. I SEE THE GREMLIN GUY AT THE END! HE'S AWAKE AND SCREAMING!

Rosetta: Ball?

Mordecai: Donut, what the hell did you do?

Donut: *ROLLING BATTLE FORMATION.* I GOT THE SPELL FROM THAT SKUNK'S HAT! YOU KNOW, THE STINKY WIZARD HAT? IT'S AN ATROCITY SPELL, AND THE TOWER MAKES IT REALLY POWERFUL. I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS GOING TO BE *THAT* POWERFUL! BUT I CAN TELL IT WHERE TO ROLL! I CAN DRIVE IT LIKE A REMOTE CONTROL. IT'S, UH, REALLY, REALLY, *REALLY BIG.*

Carl: How long does it last?

Donut: IT SAYS UNTIL IT SUSTAINS ENOUGH DAMAGE!

Mordecai: Wait, wait, wait. Are you telling me you just made a ball of swine, but out of *everyone*? Including two gods? There has to be tens of thousands of people in that thing! And the system just let you do it?

Donut: IN MY DEFENSE, I DIDN'T KNOW THE DINK WAS GOING TO BE SUCKED INTO THE SPELL, TOO. THE BACK END IS JUST SLOPPED OUT THE BACK LIKE THE BALL FORGOT TO ZIP UP.

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THE ENORMOUS BALL OF FLESH FLOP-ROLLED OVER THE FIELDS, AND Harpocrates followed.

It would take some time for the ball to get to its destination, which was the field of corpses just on the other side of the Madness castle where I now stood. I turned my attention to the castle in front of me, plotting a route through the field of traps. I eyed an acceptable path. “Rend,” I called. “Into your carrier!”

The meatball was as tall as my waist and could now run pretty fast, but with my newly-enhanced speed, there was no way he could keep up. He started to giggle in protest, and I promised to free him again when we arrived.

I took an *Invisibility* potion, and then I tossed one onto Jamal and a second onto Gonk. To my surprise, that affected everyone riding the mount. They turned to an outline. Jamal hopped up and down.

“Stay on me,” I called back at Dong, who spurred Gonk forward. I knew Dong had the *Twinkle Toes* spell and could keep up. The yak grunted and started moving. Jamal, too, could now move terrifyingly fast with his mechanical spider legs.

Donut: SOMEBODY NEEDS TO KEEP THE MUTE HARPO GOD GUY AWAY FROM MY BALL. HE’S GOING TO BREAK IT OPEN TOO SOON!

Carl: Maybe that'll be a good thing if he breaks it open now. They shoot all over when the ball breaks!

Donut: I'M TRYING TO WIN THIS WAR, CARL. WE NEED THEM COMPLETELY SEPARATED AND AWAY FROM THE GOD.

Carl: That's not going to happen if Meatus is stuck in there.

Donut: OH LIKE YOUR PLANS ALWAYS GO OFF WITHOUT A HITCH. JUST LET ME GET THEM TO THE CORPSES. SOMEONE DISTRACT HARPOCRATES.

As others started fielding suggestions, I kept an eye on the chat with Louis and Rosetta as I rushed toward the Madness stronghold. I was fighting the urge to continually distract Louis with suggestions. He had landed atop the flat Reaver castle and was now running, casting a smoke cloud behind him. He hadn't yet engaged with any enemy, but he'd managed to secure a handful of unexploded No Disassembles and Waffle Makers into his inventory. He had no way of setting them off without blowing himself up. They had to be unstable as fuck. Louis did *not* have invulnerability.

Samantha was on her way toward him.

The yellow glow of invulnerability remained pulsing on my own arms. Only Dong had the glow as well, and I wondered on that. I knew the system considered the sluggalos and the former tattoos as a different kind of NPC, which was why Bigs and Jamal hadn't been affected. Pets, too. But Dong Quixote was one of the strippers. Splash Zone and Doctor Bones and Gluteus Maxx had all been pulled into the pile and were now part of the massive battle formation. So why hadn't it worked on Dong? I didn't know.

The Madness castle loomed.

As far as buildings went, this one was pretty small. It wasn't as tiny as the castle Empress D'Nadia had erected, but it was a smaller, rectangular building, like the size of a regular supermarket. I knew there were multiple barracks buildings around the castle I couldn't see, buried in the ground. I also knew the ground under the castle was porous. Good for one or two people to burrow up into and infiltrate, but not ideal for the diggers, which was why Juice Box had assigned one to the Dream castle instead...

That gave me an idea.

Carl: Britney, have them use the digger under the Dream castle to try to distract Harpocrates! They have these giant goddamned robots and they haven't done anything yet with them.

Britney: Uh, okay. I'll try. Arief controls them while Juice Box is away. I'll ask.

Carl: For fuck's sake, Victory. You're not done with your meeting yet? Juice Box is missing the war!

Baroness Victory: Carl, trust me on this. You want this trial to go on as long as possible. We're stalling on purpose. We will stall until the AI gets so pissed, it ends it.

I didn't know what the hell *that* meant.

Donut: IT'S GOING TO TAKE MORE THAN JUST A GIANT ROBOT TO DISTRACT THAT GOD. HE'S TRYING TO GET HIS STOLEN WIENER BACK. GUYS ARE PRETTY SINGLE-MINDED WHEN IT COMES TO THAT SORT OF THING. WAIT, I HAVE AN IDEA. UH, LI-NA'S PEOPLE. COVER YOUR EARS.

I returned my attention to the Madness castle. According to Juice Box's team, there was a hidden door against this back wall. We angled toward that. Behind me, Dong grunted as they stepped on a summon trap. It misfired because of the teleport ban, which was good because it had been a *Summon Face-Melting Acid Rats* trap.

I knew the castle was surrounded by a few protections we couldn't avoid, and at any moment...

You have been deshrouded! Your invisibility has been negated by the castle's protections!

"Oh well," I said as I reached the hidden door. It wasn't truly "hidden" so much as painted the same color as the rest of the building. It had three traps on it, and I disabled them all. It was actually a rolling, garage-style door, likely the same door some of the troops had come out of when they'd come to face us. The door was tall enough that Dong wouldn't have to dismount or even lower his lance. The door wasn't meant to be opened from the outside, but I grabbed the bottom, and I strained. There was a pop, and the door slid upward, revealing a large room, empty of people. A line of those dune buggy things sat up against the far wall. An alarm klaxon started to sound, but it immediately cut off.

I pulled Rend back out and set him free. He took a few tentative steps into the Madness castle and giggled.

Donut's voice echoed over the battlefield, amplified by the massive PA system. There was a shriek of feedback as Donut cleared her throat. She added reverb and a little bit of delay to her voice as well.

“HEY, DICKLESS,” she bellowed. “IT’S GONE. YOU’RE NOT GONNA BE ABLE TO PUT IT BACK ON. AND HONESTLY, DO YOU REALLY WANT IT BACK AFTER ALL THOSE PEOPLE TOUCHED IT? IT SMELLS REALLY, REALLY BAD NOW.” She paused. “YEAH, THAT’S RIGHT. I’M TALKING TO YOU. SO STOP TRYING TO GET IT BACK. YOU SHOULD JUST ACCEPT YOUR BODY HOW IT IS. I HAVE A SONG FOR YOU. MY FRIEND LIL WAYNE WROTE IT. IT’S ABOUT WIENERS.”

Topping at number one on May 3rd, 2008, it’s “Lollipop!”

The very ground shook as the distant sound reached us.

Donut: IT’S WORKING! HE STOPPED! HE’S COVERING HIS EARS!

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. What did we say about pissing off gods?

Donut: I DO FEEL BAD ABOUT THE INSULTS BECAUSE MORDECAI SAYS HE’S NORMALLY A NICE GOD, BUT HE’S TRYING TO HURT OUR FRIENDS. BY THE WAY, THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF A BASS-HEAVY SONG, CARL. FEEL HOW THE GROUND SHAKES? IT’S DESIGNED TO UPSET OLD PEOPLE AND THOSE WHO DON’T KNOW HOW TO HAVE FUN.

Britney: The digger is coming!

Donut: OH, GOOD! I’LL START A BATTLE PLAYLIST. THE BALL WILL GET TO THE CORPSES IN LIKE TEN MINUTES. PEOPLE MESSAGE ME YOUR SONGS.

Thankfully, the music wasn’t that loud from here. Behind me, both Jamal and Bigs were bouncing to the distant song. Dong looked annoyed. His eyes flashed, and I suspected he was sending a song request to Donut.

“Come on, guys,” I said. “Let’s try to clear this as quickly as we can, and we can be nearby when the others get here.”

“Oh, are the others coming back?” Jamal asked.

“Uh, sort of,” I said, stepping into the castle.

Entering the Castle of the Madness.

I cast *Ping*.

The submarine-like sonar sound echoed out, revealing that the castle had about twenty soldiers within. Of the twenty dots, only three were purple, indicating them as offworlders. That was it. Eighteen of them were in a room just around the corner. Two—one white and one purple—were in a room adjacent to the throne room.

That was the operating theater. That would be where Architect Houston spent most of his time, and that purple dot was likely him.

Your Book of Voodoo has updated with three entries.

I paused at that. I opened up *Find Crawler*, clicked a few buttons, and a list of three crawlers appeared. The moment that happened, four additional dots appeared on my map. Three crawlers and the corpse of a crawler. Two of the crawlers were mixed in with the 18 other soldiers. Those two both had the light blue glow, indicating they were in the Madness military, likely under a *Conscription* spell. The third crawler did not have the glow, and they were in the room with Architect Houston and the white NPC dot. The corpse was also in there.

I focused on the corpse. **Corpse of Crawler Zeynep, level 58.** I wasn't close enough to examine her further. I sighed. I knew her. I'd had her in my chat, but we hadn't spoken at all on this floor.

I'd met her on the previous floor during that clusterfuck of an assault on the Desperado Club when we'd assassinated Astrid. Zeynep along with three other members of her party had been dancing at the club, and I'd tried to get them to leave. The sole male of the group, a large, burly man named Emir had been drunk, and he'd attacked me. I'd stomped his ass and got them to leave. Zeynep had been the voice of reason during the whole confrontation.

But the group that was now here was different. It was the same two women who'd been at the club, but the man—Emir—wasn't here. The two women were conscripted and mixed in with the guards. I didn't have either of them in my chat.

The third living member of the group was someone that was off and on the top ten, and I did have her in my chat, though we'd never spoken. I'd met her briefly during the Butcher's Masquerade. Burcu. She was a badger-headed porsuk, and she had a swashbuckler class, same as both Tran and Bautista. I was pretty sure that she, too, had a quest involving the memorial crystal that was now stuck in the middle of the giant, rolling ball of crawlers. She'd been part of the fight to grab the thing.

She wasn't moving, and she did not have the blue glow of conscription.

Then, I realized the NPC that was in the room with her and Houston had a *green* glow, indicating them as someone from Team Retribution. For a moment, I feared some sort of double cross, but just as I thought that, the NPC dot turned to the X of a corpse. It wouldn't let me examine it. I sent a quick note to Britney, and then I opened a new chat.

Carl: Burcu, I know we haven't talked, but can you see this?

Warning: Because of repeated warnings, this message has *not* been delivered, and the log has been sent to your adjutant for review. Burcu is unaffiliated with the Princess Posse, and any planning may be construed as illegal corroboration.

I growled.

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated with an entry from Crawler Burcu.

Huh, I thought. I pulled the book from my inventory and quickly flipped through.

I went to the entry page for Burcu, which was the last page of the book. It wasn't an entry directed to me, but she was swiftly drawing a map of the surgical theater. My eyes took in the line of Xs with the notification "Fireball traps" over them. She started to rapidly write something about Houston, but before I could read it, the book slammed shut on its own, like it was possessed.

Warning: This is still cheating, you clown. Nice try, though. I do like a good loophole, but you need to be using this damn book for something else.

Outside, the song changed. I missed the title, but it was a guy talk-singing about a detachable penis.

Donut's voice boomed over the PA, now mostly muted since we were inside the castle. "THIS SONG WAS A TERRIBLE CHOICE, CHOI MI-SEON 2. IT'LL GIVE HIM THE WRONG IDEA."

Carl: What's the god doing now?

Donut: HE WAS COMING TOWARD ME, BUT THAT STUPID SONG CHOICE MADE HIM TURN BACK AROUND. IT'S OKAY. THE BALL HAS A BIG HEAD START NOW, AND I THINK THE DIGGER IS COMING.

On the map, the group of dots shifted. All of them, including the two crawlers, started moving in our direction. At the same moment, a list of

psionic attacks started spamming across my interface. None stuck. None of us seemed affected.

“They’re coming,” Dong said.

Rend giggled, his voice now deep and terrifying.

The group rushed into the room and stopped when they saw me and Dong. I held out my hand, which still glowed yellow. None of them had invulnerability.

“Well, this is going to be fun,” I said.

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SLAM! THE FINAL MERCENARY CRASHED AGAINST THE WALL AFTER GETTING brained by Dong. The gnoll mercenary exploded into a pile of coins as he crashed to the ground. The coins scattered over the concrete floor of the room, spinning and twirling.

The older stripper looked absolutely menacing atop the blood-soaked yak, whose horns still held an impaled guard. Gonk, seeing the battle was now over, started casually gnawing on the leg of the mercenary—also a gnoll—impaled upon her.

Rend had likewise managed to get in there and kill a taurin mercenary who'd already been punched unconscious. He was leaning into the open chest and blowing bubbles with the gore, giggling each time blood splashed onto the floor.

"Jesus Christ, Rend," I said. "Don't be gross."

He looked up at me and smiled big, his tooth gleaming. He made a noise that kind of sounded like "Bubbles."

Behind me, Jamal was hopping in circles around the two terrified crawlers as Bigs tied them up. The two women were named Selvi and Tuba, and they both sobbed. I couldn't tell if it was from anger or relief. I'd ordered the shark and Bigs the slug to not hurt them, but the one named Tuba bled profusely from a wound on her side, given to her by Jamal who'd been forced to swipe her spear away with one of his mechanical legs. Both crawlers had a nasty, no-healing debuff that we couldn't circumvent. It was

a side effect bestowed upon those under *Conscription* when they refused to fight.

Selvi was no longer human, but an elf. She was a **level-57 Valide**, which appeared to be some sort of healer class. Tuba was a human and **level-56 Boring Ol' Fighter**. Both were pretty young, in their early twenties, and they both struggled and fought against their bindings. We dropped a pair of *Mute* containments on them both, just in case they were overwhelmed by their debuff and forced to cast a spell.

Tuba would bleed out soon if I didn't get them broken from their conscription. And I couldn't do that until we defeated the Madness. We needed to hurry this up.

Outside, "Little Red Corvette" by Prince blasted. The massive ball of crawlers and mercenaries continued to roll in our direction, but Harpocrates no longer pursued. The god instead moved toward Donut again, but he was now waylaid by one of the diggers, which I still hadn't seen. I hadn't heard from Louis or Samantha in a while, but his health was still full according to the warlord display.

Dong dismounted Gonk and examined the gold coins on the ground. That happened sometimes when one was killed by Dong's crust sock. One of the coins still spun, and he reached down and snatched it up. As I watched, he took the coin, kissed it, opened up the bloody sock, and dropped the coin within with a *clink*.

"I thought they were all nickels in there," I said.

Dong was muttering to himself and didn't answer me. I turned back to the carnage and quickly looted the bodies, including a pair of Viceroy's. That left a single Viceroy in the castle, Admiral Houston himself.

Behind me, Selvi and Tuba groaned. I deliberately didn't ask them any questions. If I did, and they answered, they'd receive additional penalties from their debuff. The best thing we could do for them was tie them up and hope they were strong enough to resist the almost unstoppable urges they had to fight back.

"All buttoned up," Bigs said as she finished circling Selvi. She shook her hatchet threateningly. "Don't you be trying to escape."

"Dong, Rend with me. Rest of you stay here," I said. "Keep them safe and make sure Gonk doesn't wander off. We'll be right back. Do not hurt them. They're good guys who are under spells. Do you two understand?"

"Jamal will keep them safe." He did a little hop and spurted a flame.

“Can I kill one of them?” Bigs asked. “That one is already bleeding pretty good.”

“Holy shit, Bigs. She’s a friend. One of us. A good guy. Keep them safe.”

“I’ll wait until he’s gone,” Bigs whispered loudly at the two women. “Then one of you is getting the chop.”

They huddled closer together, both crying. A bloody Rend started giggling at them, which didn’t help.

I sighed. Dong and I were the only ones with invulnerability, and we needed to move fast. “You know what, Bigs? Change of plan. Go on a reconnaissance. See if you can find and open the front door.”

“Yeah, baby!” Bigs said as she slithered off down a main hallway, trailing orange slime. I could see it was littered with summon traps that would no longer work.

“Keep them safe,” I reiterated to Jamal. “And Rend, you stay here, too.” We turned and hurried down the hall in the opposite direction. The surgical theater and the throne room were right next to each other, just around the corner.

I could hear the screaming as I stepped into the hall, though as soon as I heard it, the sound cut off sharply. The hallways here were wide and unadorned, and the floors were a white, speckled tile. Everything was crisp, clean. Well-lit. I was reminded of a hospital.

With each step, Dong’s armored feet echoed loudly. His sock, I realized, was significantly larger than it had been before, and it dragged on the floor behind him.

Samantha: LOUIS, WHERE ARE YOU?

Louis: I’m stuck. It says level six, hallway C. I stepped on a snare trap, and I can’t move for a few minutes. I filled the area with a poison cloud, but it doesn’t work on them. They have these little dog robot things that shoot darts... Guys, I’m in trouble. I have some No Disassemble robot killers, but the explosions are too big. I can’t do it where I’m stuck. I don’t know what to do.

Samantha: OKAY, I HAVE AN IDEA TO SAVE YOU, BUT YOU GOTTA TRUST ME.

We turned the corner, and the screaming started up again. I paused, giving Dong a look. Again, the screaming abruptly cut off.

“That... that sounds like it’s *him* screaming. Architect Houston.”

Dong shrugged as we continued.

The door to the surgical theater stood at the end of the hall, right next to the throne room, which sat unguarded. The theater entrance was just a pair of swinging double doors with a sign that read “Do Not Enter” over it. There was a second, neon-like sign that read “Amplification in process.” It was lit.

There was an advanced alarm trap and a trap door trap in front of both the surgical theater and the throne room. The trap door trap was interesting, but I didn’t have time to examine it now. I quickly took all of them and stored them away.

Bigs suddenly appeared, coming from the opposite side. She slimed up and said, “Yo, daddy-o. The front door is just sitting there all wide open. I don’t see nothing out there except a bunch of fields and shit.”

“You couldn’t see a giant, rolling ball of people coming in our direction?”

“You smoking jelly bellies, boss? Ain’t nothing like that.” She looked back, as if she could see from here. “But there could be, I guess. It’s dark as a wombat’s asshole out there.”

“Okay,” I said. I pointed to the throne room. “Go in there and wait. Don’t leave until I tell you.”

“Aight,” the slug said and started sliming into the room. The moment she entered, the notification appeared.

System Message: The Throne Room of the Madness is being occupied by forces from The Princess Posse. If they can hold for six hours, the Madness will be defeated!

I double checked to make sure the immortality remained on my arms, and I cracked my neck.

“Stay behind me,” I said. I prepared *Tripper*. I was going to walk in, eyeball the location of all the supposed fire traps, make certain Burcu wasn’t in the line of fire, and then cast.

I pushed open the double doors, and I stepped into the surgical theater of Architect Houston of the Madness. Dong jumped in behind me with a wheezy war cry.

I stopped dead, preventing Dong from entering the room further the moment I eyed the circle of traps in the room. I wouldn’t be casting *Tripper* on these.

“Huh,” was all Dong said as we both paused at the door, seeing what was going on within.

I wasn't sure *what* I was expecting to see, but this was not it.

The large, octagon-shaped room itself was pretty much what we'd anticipated: a crisp, starkly white room with a group of surgical tables in the middle, surrounded by a raised viewing area so students could sit and watch the in-process surgical procedures. A massive, cumbersome mechanical apparatus hung from the center of the high ceiling. Dozens of mechanical arms came off the machine, and it whisked and whirred as it worked.

There were four tables, and three were occupied.

The fourth table was empty, but it appeared as if twenty gallons of blood had been dumped on it from above. The blood was shockingly red in the white room. The source of the blood was gone, but a familiar-looking cleaner bot that was the same model as our own—but painted solid white—was studiously at work, slurping the blood off the floor.

The first occupied table contained the corpse of the crawler Zeynep. They had done... *something* to her. Something unspeakable. Something I won't describe. I couldn't bear to look at her for more than a cursory moment. Still, I caught her lifeless eyes in the bright light, and despite all the other craziness in the room, those dead eyes caught my own just long enough for me to feel accused by her. Accused for what she'd been forced to endure.

The second table contained Burcu, who was alive. She struggled against what appeared to be magical bonds. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Dried blood ran down the front of her badger face and throat. Tears streamed.

The third table... I blinked, not comprehending what I saw. There were two forms on the table. One was the blank, dead corpse of the changeling, whose name had been Namico. It said his cause of death was **Died on the Surgical Table**, which was the same as Zeynep.

The changeling had suffered a similar, but not as... thorough fate as Zeynep. It appeared as if he had been peeled open. He wasn't truly on the table, but upside down, hovering about ten inches over the other form,

clutched in the mechanical arms of the machine hanging from the ceiling. The changeling faced downward, offset and facing in the wrong direction as the table's other occupant, with only their torsos overlapping.

Architect Houston was the form. His robes were gone. His mask was gone, revealing the horrific, multi-limbed, half bug, half monster that he was. He was on his back on the table, facing the dead changeling that dangled above him. He was awake, saying something to the machine.

The machine was... connecting Houston to the changeling. Physically connecting him. Things were coming out of the changeling and going into Houston and vice-versa.

The giant machine itself was something straight from a mad scientist's fever dream of a lair. It was a chandelier covered in robotic arms and surgical tools, all spinning and waving about, silently whisking as they worked.

The thing was made of gleaming chrome, and the moment my eyes focused on it, an info box appeared.

The Grease Monkey. Viceroy Portable Surgical and Scientific Exploration Unit. Outpost version.

Tech-based surgical repair unit automaton.

This thing isn't really necessary here in the dungeon where we use potions and magic and basically free, universal healthcare to keep your UTIs in check, unless, you know, it's funny not to. You're welcome about that, by the way. But out in the wide universe, outside the center system where literally hundreds of thousands of different species struggle daily to survive? What does one do for healthcare, especially when you're far from home, or you're afflicted with something your local doctors simply can't fix?

You can't just travel to the inner system and take advantage of their free healing. Not if you're not a citizen. And if you're one of those species the local doctor has never even heard of, what the hell are you going to do? Die because of a hangnail?

There's a reason why the Viceroys provide free transportation to their systems. And if there's a mass casualty event, or better yet, a war? Heck, they'll come to you. And when they do, they'll bring one of these things with them.

The Portable Surgical Automaton Unit, colloquially known as the Grease Monkey, is a marvel of technology. Even if your species is one of

those “What the fuck is that thing?” this automaton will analyze your anatomy, take you apart, and put you back together again good as new. Well, mostly.

What a lot of people don’t know is that surgical repair is actually the *secondary* purpose of these machines. Viceroy’s have no passion for healing. Their passion is science. Understanding the universe. Understanding everything from the atom to the tree, no matter the cost.

They’ll gladly operate on anybody, no questions asked. But it still ain’t free.

Nothing is free in this galaxy. That should be perfectly clear by now.

The good news is if you can’t pay right away, that’s okay. The Viceroy’s have multiple payment options and opportunities available for you. And if you want to sign yourself over to their post-biological form studies corp, all your bills will be wiped away.

Incidentally, Architect Houston, who is currently being operated on by his own machine, is the prime of the Viceroy’s not because he was elected so, or because of some innate ability to lead his people, but because he’s made the most scientific discoveries. Most of which were made with the help of this very machine you see before you now.

“Stay back,” Houston called at me. He was clearly in pain as the machine continued to work. Hundreds of tiny little arms appeared, and they were connecting what appeared to be nerves from the changeling’s neck to Houston. “You take one step in here, and it’ll set off the traps, incinerating us all. “I’m almost done. I’m almost there. You’ll have your victory, Carl. I care no longer for what happens here. Let me finish. Let me finish, and your fellow crawler doesn’t have to die. This is my life’s work. I’m almost there.”

I spared another glance at the ring of traps circling the room. They were up, out of reach on the second floor of the surgical theater, all facing downward from the edge of the observation deck. There were eight of them, though it appeared just one was enough to absolutely kill everything in the room.

Containment Breach Trap Mark IV.

Warning: This trap is *Trip*per proof.

Warning: This trap is chained in a sequence.

Warning: Removing or triggering a single trap in the sequence will activate all remaining traps in the sequence.

Warning: This trap has a dead man's switch. It is attached to Architect Houston of the Madness. If he is killed, this trap will automatically trigger.

I had never seen nor heard of anything like that, but the traps were each the size of a shoe box, much bigger than the regular, Lego-sized trap modules. These things were more like weapons than traps.

They would shoot literal Sheol fire into the room, instantly incinerating everything. They would be triggered by anyone who wasn't affiliated with the Madness who stepped on the floor.

My invulnerability wasn't as good as the one I'd had earlier. Still, I was pretty sure I'd be fine, but I wasn't positive. Burcu didn't have the invulnerability, and she would absolutely get turned to ash.

Donut: HARPOCRATES RIPPED THE GIANT ROBOT IN HALF AND THREW HALF OF IT AT ME! IT DIDN'T FLY FAR ENOUGH TO GET TO ME, BUT HE'S COMING IN MY DIRECTION NOW. I TURNED THE MUSIC OFF, BUT HE'S STILL COMING! I'M THINKING I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID SO MANY MEAN THINGS TO HIM. GUYS SURE ARE SENSITIVE WHEN YOU MAKE FUN OF THEIR WIENERS. HE EVEN MARKED ME FOR DEATH!

Carl: Get out of the tower! Someone get Donut out of there!

Donut: I STILL HAVE TIME. THE BALL IS ALMOST THERE. I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER UNTIL THEY GET TO THE CORPSES! IF I DON'T STAY, THEN EVERYONE IS IN TROUBLE. EVERYONE ON OUR TEAM MIGHT DIE!

Li Jun: He's going to get to you before the ball reaches the other field. I have an idea. Speaker number 11 is still on the back of a cart. Mute all the speakers except that one. Play the song I just sent you.

Li Na: Jun, no. No!

Li Jun: Sorry, little sister. I'll jump before he catches me.

It took everything I had to focus on the task at hand. Li Jun was distracting the angry god so Donut could finish her plan, and it was all I could do to not scream.

More messages flooded in, including a hysterical one from Louis and Samantha both. The very world rumbled as something else happened out there.

I sent another message to Burcu, and to my surprise, this time it was delivered.

Carl: I don't know if this is going to come through, but we're going to get you out of here. Do you know what he's doing?

Burcu: There you are! None of my messages were delivered. He cut out my tongue and voice box. I can't speak. He tortured my mother. He killed her right in front of me. Free me so I can kill him. These bindings won't let me cast magic. You owe me, Carl. You killed my father. Free me now.

I had no idea what she was talking about in regards to her father. I reexamined the trap and then examined her bindings. The trap required someone to step on the floor to be set off. The bindings on the table appeared to be controlled via a switch on the wall. On the surgical table, Houston cast a spell, surprising me. But the spell was directed at the corpse hovering over him. The dead changeling started to thrash, but the mechanical arms held it in place.

I turned to Dong. "Keep an eye on Houston. Kill him if he starts to cast anything else."

"Kill him how? I don't have ranged weapons."

"By stepping into the room."

Dong looked nervously at the yellow glow on his arms. "Uh, are you sure? What are you doing?"

I took a step back, ran, and activated *Walk on Air* as I rushed across the room. The skill was not a flying skill, and it didn't work all that great. It was more of a glorified long jump. I aimed for the closest table, which was the empty one covered in blood. I landed heavily, slipped in the blood, and flew onto my back, hitting the table hard. Blood splattered everywhere.

The white cleaner bot let out a familiar, shrill cry and zoomed up at me and beeped.

"Sorry," I said to the thing. It beeped again and moved closer to me, as if it was going to attack. I reached up and grabbed it with two hands. I felt a familiar haptic buzz, indicating I could stick it in my inventory, which surprised me. I didn't question it, and I took it.

Across the way, Houston was crying in pain as the machine appeared to start removing some of his lower guts, letting them slop onto the floor. Above him, the changeling started to vibrate. I stood, judging the distance to the next table which held the corpse of Zeynep. From that table, I could reach the switch, which would turn off her bindings. The *Walk on Air* had a one minute cooldown, but I could make the next jump without it. I still

didn't know how the hell we were going to get her out of here once I got to her. I hoped the skill was strong enough to let me carry her.

"Don't leave the table when the bindings are gone!" I called at Burcu. "Trust me. We'll get him, but let me get you out of the room first." I jumped, and I landed on the second table, landing amongst the gore of Zeynep. The body fell apart when I landed, much of it sloughing to the floor. It did not set off the trap. I'd damaged the corpse enough it disappeared from my map. I held down my gorge. The switch was right there on the wall. I turned, and Burcu continued to thrash, an enraged look about her as she struggled.

She's going to jump off that table the moment I hit it.

"Carl. Do not... Do not press that button. I can stop it all," Houston called. "You don't understand. It is called the Beautiful Place. I can get there. They are the key. The changelings. This world. Why do you think we come here, cycle after cycle? You've helped make the greatest discovery in history, and you don't even realize it. It was here all along, right under our mandibles."

I quickly sifted through my inventory and found what I was looking for.

"Sorry," I said to Burcu as I pulled out the wand of *Nighty-Night*. Her eyes went wide, and she started to thrash as I pointed it at her and cast. She immediately conked out, and a 5-minute timer appeared above her head. I reached over and hit the switch, and the magical bindings around her disappeared. I prepared to jump onto her table. This was going to be tricky because I needed to land around her, not on her. If I slipped...

"Uh, Carl," Dong called from the doorway.

Donut: GO FASTER LI JUN! HE IS CATCHING UP!

Rosetta: Eris is awake, but she's still in the middle of the ball! She's trying to escape, but she still can't move. She turned off her *Witness* spell and just removed everyone's invulnerability, but they're still invulnerable anyway. The *Rolling Battle Formation* spell keeps them immobile and invulnerable. But they'll be exposed the moment the ball breaks!

While the thousands of people in the giant ball were still invulnerable because of the ball spell itself, I was no longer safe. I looked down at my arm, and the yellow glow was gone.

"Oh, fuck."

At that moment, I heard Mordecai's voice. *You can't save them all, kid.* I didn't even know this Burcu person, and by all accounts, she was kind of an ass. And now I was in serious trouble because I hadn't simply let her die. I could have ended this just by stepping into the room, and now it was too late.

Li Jun: Sister. Tell Zhang I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to his face. Tell him I won our bet. And you. Protect him. I want you to be kind to the others. This was my decision. I had to do it. I know you get angry. If you must, be angry with me. I love you with all I have. I love you with the moon and the sun and all the stars in the sky. I will see you soon, and I will tell mama you said hello.

Across from me, a health bar had appeared over the Viceroy and started to rapidly lower. Above him, the changeling continued to thrash. They now looked like they were two pieces of hot cheese that had just been pulled apart.

The changeling started to change, despite being dead. Tentacles, or roots, actually, grew from its lower half.

"Yes!" Houston called as he died. He was sobbing. "I found you. I found you. After all this time. You were right here all along. It's really you, isn't it? Not just an avatar. It's you. It's you."

I took a *Fine Healing* potion, and I threw it at the warlord. It crashed against the man's alien head.

"Gah!" he cried as his health rocketed back up. "No! No! What did you do?" Above him, the creature that used to be the changeling started to scream. Vines appeared out of nowhere and wrapped their way up the machine. A high-pitched, shrill, bone-shaking scream came from the creature, who remained in the clutches of the surgical apparatus.

I ignored this as I jumped across the way, landing on the table with the unconscious Burcu. I wobbled as the table started to roll. I wasn't expecting that. I reached down to pick Burcu up and pull her over my shoulder.

And that's when the table tipped over.

I saw the disaster unfolding in slow motion.

You can do that, sometimes. In the midst of chaos. You can see it. You can focus on the event horizon and see it so, so clearly you wonder how you never saw it before.

Burcu had awakened the moment I touched her, and I met her eyes as she fell toward the white, clean floor. And like her dead mother, I saw

accusation there. At the same moment, I sailed over her and hit the floor with my bare feet.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” was all Houston said in the moments before the traps fired.

For my part, I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase* the very moment my feet touched the ground.

I shot forward in the direction I was facing, which was toward Architect Houston, still alive, still on the table, still under the creature surgically attached to him.

I pushed through them, everything moving in slow motion as the fire descended upon the room from all directions at once. I passed through the naked Houston, unraveling him. I felt the tendrils whip around me, despite my non-corporeal form. My shoulder felt as if I hit a solid wall, and I was suddenly spinning.

It was there, spinning with me, facing me. The creature, looking into my eyes. It said nothing. It pulsated with black energy, regarding me. It just looked at me, and then it leaned in, as if to kiss me. And in that moment, as we still spun, it changed, turning momentarily into a face I recognized.

Li Jun.

I couldn’t understand what was happening. Just that it was important. We were moving and frozen at the same time. Spinning yet stopped. It was like that moment with Paulie. Frozen in time. Moving at incredible speed, all at once.

“Thank you for giving me more time with my sister and my best friend,” Li Jun said as roots wrapped around him and suddenly whisked him away.

I moved through the double doors of the room, past Dong, just barely missing him by inches, as I hit the floor and slid.

I blinked, and I realized I’d been knocked unconscious for just a moment. Dong was over me, casting a *Healing* spell. I felt my shoulder crack painfully into place. I wasn’t burned, but I felt the heat from the room next door. The castle was on fire. Bigs had abandoned the throne room and was shouting.

I'd cast *Gloom Wraith Phase* to escape the room, but I'd hit something magical on the way out, which had injured me. I'd seen something, but I wasn't sure if it was real. It felt like a dream. Either way, Architect Houston was dead. Burcu was dead. I'd barely escaped.

There were multiple messages on my screen, but a single message stood out, like a punch in the gut.

Li Jun: Thank you for giving me more time with my sister and my best friend.

This message is from a deceased crawler.

"No, no, Li Jun. No," I whispered, my voice hoarse. I thought of that moment when we'd been face to face. Was that real? What did that mean?

I took a deep breath. Donut and Li Na were both screaming in chat, but I pushed it away for now. I couldn't look. I just couldn't. I needed to breathe.

The system wouldn't let me.

System Message: Architect Houston of the Madness has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to Warlord Carl of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Madness has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Madness have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

System Message: Battlefield conditions have been met. Larracos is no longer safe.

Warning. Warning. Warning.

System Message: The Peeling Phase is upon us. This city is open. First to take the castle, wins.

And remember, folks. Only one team can win. Alliances don't matter in the end.

This was followed by a barrage of messages.

Baroness Victory: I'm sorry. We tried to delay as long as possible. Our attempts have backfired. We were out maneuvered.

Warlord Juice Box: We need help! They're everywhere! The War Mages aren't our friends. We need help!

Britney: They're breaking in. I have to run!

Warlord Message: A full quorum adjudication has determined no cheating has occurred by any warlords. Any players under an administrative hold have now been released.

Warlord Message: After a careful deliberation, it has been determined that the Non-Team Entity known as the War Mage Rebellion will not be allowed access to Larracos until the Peeling phase.

Warlord Message: Since we are now in the Peeling Phase, this ruling is rendered moot. However, the system has determined that the Quorum's ruling has given the War Mage Rebellion standing.

Warlord Message: Warlord Agatha of the War Mage Rebellion has proposed three emergency action items.

Action item one. "The War Mage Rebellion be given full resources and access to the warlord system. In addition, we are now allowed to claim thrones for our own."

This request has been granted. And frankly, you already had this, so this was pretty much a waste of an action item.

Action item two. "The War Mage Rebellion be given full access to the *Conscription* spell and all its benefits."

This request has been granted. The *Conscription* spell will now allow unaffiliated players to be conscripted into the War Mage Rebellion.

Action item three. "During the Peeling Phase, revert to the rules of the original Faction Wars. Warlords and all soldiers of a defeated team should automatically die if they lose during the Peeling Phase."

I mean. Why not? You want drama. Now we got drama.

This request has been granted with a caveat. From this point forward, every affiliated soldier and warlord on a team *who is still on the battlefield* will now drop dead where they stand the moment the team is defeated.

Holy shit. My mind reeled. Agatha? What the actual fuck.

And the last part was terrifying. There could only be one winner. It was either us or Juice Box's team. It was all or nothing. Us versus them, exactly what we'd been trying to avoid.

But the gut punches kept coming.

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution is being occupied by forces from the War Mage Rebellion.

Per the Peeling Phase ruleset, they now have control of the city defense system. There is a half-hour grace period before the towers are active.

If they can hold the throne room for six hours, the War Mage Rebellion will be declared winner of this season of Faction Wars.

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[PART 4]
THE PEELING OF LARRACOS

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SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER

“No,” Katia said, looking about. “No, please. Not this.” A bird appeared on her shoulder. A bird with the skull of a child, and it rubbed its small, ghoulish head against Katia’s in a gesture of comfort. This was her card from the previous floor. The bird’s name was Annie.

Something had gone wrong. I wasn’t supposed to be here. I was in Katia’s dream. I was supposed to have gone and experienced a dream from Shi Maria’s point of view, and Katia was supposed to have faced this dream on her own.

We’d taken the potions and had both gone a little loopy. In that moment, I’d felt something strange. It was as if... as if I’d been wrapped in plastic this whole time, and for just a moment, that plastic was gone. I had popped open like a tree whose bindings had suddenly been cut. My reach wasn’t far, but it was clearly beyond what it was supposed to be.

Katia and I had reached forward and touched hands. Edgar had yelled, and Imani was there, separating us.

But she had only separated us physically. There was a second connection between Katia and myself, and that was what had bound me to her dream.

In that moment, I’d connected with more than just Katia. I’d caught the briefest of glimpses of everyone nearby. Of Mordecai and that deep, bottomless well of sadness within. Of Rosetta, and the tired rage. Of Edgar the tortoise and the strange sense of fear and wonder at all the things he was suddenly remembering from his hundreds of past lives. Of Bucket Boy the crocodilian NPC, who wondered why he didn’t remember the things the

other strippers said they did, and the shame he felt because of it, like it meant he somehow wasn't worthy.

And Imani. Oh, god. Imani. Most of what I saw with the others was emotion and maybe an inkling at what caused it, but with her, and Katia, I saw more. I saw what Imani carried. It was just a glimpse, but it was so, so much. She'd fled her home in Detroit, and her older brothers and sisters blamed her for leaving the family. But she had to. She had to get away. She'd earned her nursing certificate and found a job in what she considered the middle of nowhere. A relatively small, beautiful town where drugs and violence and despair were just something one saw on the news. She was always chasing peace despite the overwhelming guilt she carried, like a heavy sack she couldn't put down. She was sick of being looked at as the one in charge, the one who had to make the tough decisions. She didn't want that responsibility, yet it always fell to her, despite her always being the youngest one in the room.

She was in love with Chris, and I had no idea. She loved his simplicity. His quiet kindness.

It felt so private, so dirty for me to have learned about this in such a way. Like I had broken into her house and spied her utterly naked, all without her knowing.

She hadn't invited me into her mind, and I should have looked away. But I couldn't. I didn't know how. My only solace was that I knew—somehow I knew—I'd forget much of this when I finally woke up.

And I had learned all that after just the briefest glimpse.

Donut, thankfully, wasn't in the room for this. She'd been sprayed by the skunks and was still in the saferoom. That was a relief. Nobody deserved to have their mind invaded like that.

It sees us like this, I thought. This is what the dungeon sees. This is what the dungeon knows.

But that wasn't true, was it? It was in our heads, yes, but it wasn't that deep. It interpreted things incorrectly all the time. It didn't see what I saw. Or maybe it did, but it just didn't understand because it had never been human.

And what I saw with Imani was just a fraction of what I now knew about Katia.

We stood at the threshold to a hospital. There was a large statue of a chipmunk wearing a bucket hat in the entrance, a generic, please-don't-sue-

us interpretation of one of the duo from Chip and Dale. A children's hospital. All the signs were in Icelandic. Here, in the dream, I couldn't read the writing but spoken words still translated themselves in my mind.

Katia and I remained attached. I looked, and our hands were intertwined, my skin touching hers, as if we'd been surgically affixed. Her bird was like that, too.

Katia took a deep breath and moved closer to me so our arms touched. She gave me a shy smile, not at all surprised I was here with her.

A second Katia, this one a memory ghost, rushed toward the door from the outside, clutching a folder filled with papers.

The memory ghost opened the door. I was shocked at how different, how smaller she looked. This was not the Katia I knew. This woman, struggling with papers as she bungled her way through the front door of the hospital, was not someone I would ever give a second glance.

The Katia I knew. The *real* Katia. She was a blazing presence. A force of nature. I knew that's not how it started, and the Katia I first met on the third floor was much like this memory ghost before us now, but seeing the two contrasted at the same time was shocking.

"This is the moment," the real Katia said. "This is the second worst moment in my life."

The woman in the doorway paused, eyes going wide. I turned to see the man who had caught her attention. He was older, balding. This was Fannar. Her ex. Another professor. He'd had an affair with a student, and she'd reported him, and they had done nothing.

"What are you doing here?" the memory ghost of Katia asked.

"Telling them the truth," Fannar said, pushing past her.

"No," both Katias said at the same time. From her shoulder, Annie cawed.

Later, as the dream continued, as we watched Katia plead with the woman who would ultimately deny her application to adopt, and as both versions of Katia shouted *He had no right!*, we watched in silence as the woman told Katia there was nothing she could do, and that Katia should just go home and focus on her own health.

But Katia didn't go home. She left the office, she turned into a bathroom, and she locked herself into a stall. We followed, unwillingly observing as she sat down on the toilet, put her fist into her mouth, and she

silently screamed. We stood in silent witness as the dream Katia screamed and screamed and screamed.

After what seemed like forever, she wiped her tears, stood, and marched out of the bathroom.

She paused in the doorway, and she turned down the hallway leading away from the exit.

“I was so scared I’d never see her again,” the now Katia said as we followed, floating along like ghosts. “I’d already visited Annie several times at this point, and I hoped the nurses hadn’t yet been told about what Fannar had said.”

We watched dream Katia hesitantly poke her head through a pair of doors, stopping at a nurse station. “I just wanted to say hello to Annie,” dream Katia said to the nurse sitting there, who was reading an English-language romance novel.

“Oh, hi Katia. She’s having a good day today,” the nurse said without even looking up.

Katia thanked the nurse and entered a long room near the end of the hall. There were six or seven cribs in here, but all were empty except one. The little girl was on her back, playing with her toes and happily babbling. A blue, stuffed dog sat in the crib. Several colorful cutouts decorated the walls. It was a stark contrast with the machines dotted around the room.

“Hello, my love,” dream Katia said to the baby as she entered. Another nurse was at the counter and smiled as Katia entered.

“Hello, Katia,” the nurse said. “You can pick her up. Just be careful. She hasn’t pulled anything out today, and we are trying to keep it that way. Right, little Annie?” The nurse wrote something down and then turned and left the room, leaving Katia alone with the baby.

Little Annie giggled and stood up in the crib. If it wasn’t for the strange, splint-like device on the baby’s arm—which appeared to be a harness to keep her from yanking out her IV—I’d have no idea she was sick. But then I saw the little girl’s eyes, which didn’t seem to focus. Only then could I see something truly was wrong. Though Annie didn’t seem to know that. She let out a loud, happy laugh at the sound of Katia’s voice.

“I have nothing left,” dream Katia said to little Annie, keeping her voice happy and playful. “You were all I had, and I’m not even good enough for that.”

“You know that’s not true, right?” I said as we both watched.

“Brain cancer,” the now Katia said, smiling lovingly at the little girl who bounced up and down at the edge of the crib. “It is such an aggressive, evil thing. It’s not fair that we can now just drink a potion, and it’s gone. I was sick, too. I should never have tried to hide that. But I was fine and would be for a while. Long enough.” She reached down to touch the face of the little girl, and her hand went right through. “How could someone abandon such an angel?”

“How long ago was this?” I asked as the dream Katia picked up the little girl and held her in her arms, being careful not to tangle the IV tube. Tears streamed down the face of both versions of the woman.

“About a year ago. She was gone before it happened, thank god. She died in this room, I think. I could have taken her home and given her love, but I couldn’t even have that. She died without anybody to call her own. Nobody even told me. It wasn’t until I ran into that same nurse who was reading the book. She’d said it so casually, too, like it hadn’t mattered. ‘Oh, that girl? She passed a few weeks ago.’” The now Katia reached up and stroked the other Annie, the bird on her shoulder. “She was like me, in that way. All alone.”

I didn’t know what to say. What does one say to that? I felt dirty all over again, like I was seeing something so personal, so raw, nobody should be allowed to ever witness it.

Katia continued. “And every time I try to love somebody, we end up hurting each other. I do that, Carl. I hurt those I love.”

“No,” I said, finally finding my voice. “No to all of that. We are family, Katia. You were in an impossible situation here, just like how we are in an impossible situation now. But we are family, and that’s something they can never take away, no matter what happens.”

Dream Katia clutched the baby to her chest, and the little girl clung back onto her. And as they clutched onto each other, Katia swayed back and forth, singing to the girl.

“And here is the worst moment of my life because I know it’s the last time I will ever see her,” Katia said. A moment passed. “It’s also my favorite memory, and it is where I keep coming back to.”

We remained silent for some time, watching Katia sing and dance with the baby, who was soon asleep.

The now Katia reached up and wiped her eyes. “At this moment, I was so sure I was going to kill myself after this that I actually felt this calming

sense of peace. But then I thought to myself, *what if they change their mind? Then who would she have?* And the fear would come back.” Baby Annie let out a little sigh. “They never did change their minds. And then when I saw the nurse at the park, and she told me Annie was dead, as if it was nothing, I lost all the hope I had all over again.”

I recognized that moment of finality for what it was. I’d felt it, too. In that way, Katia and I were more alike than I’d ever realized. The last moment of the crash.

Come on now, the woman had said to me. *Come on now*.

I stepped even closer to Katia, and I leaned my head down so it touched hers, and together, we watched dream Katia dance with the child she never had.

“She knows,” I finally said, watching Katia and Annie together. “You couldn’t be together in the end, but right here, in this moment, she knows.”

“I know,” Katia said. “That’s why it’s my favorite memory.”

A few minutes passed.

“I’m worried about Daniel,” Katia finally said. “I’m worried he’s going to do something stupid if this thing with Huanxin Jinx doesn’t work out.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m worried about him, too. He loves you.”

“And I love him,” Katia said. She turned to look at me. Our hands were still connected. On her shoulder, Annie the bird spread her wings and cawed. “But as much as I love him, I want you to know I love you and Donut more.” She pointed at the dancing woman and infant. “I love you both just as much as I ever loved those two right there.”

We touched heads again. I thought of Asher. Of my father. My mother. I mourned what could have been.

“If we stick around long enough, you can see me almost get arrested,” Katia finally added. We both laughed as she wiped her eyes. “You know what? I think Mordecai’s stupid plan is actually...”

But we never got to finish. Everything was shattered a moment later as Shi Maria, confused and screaming, burst into the room, jump scaring us both as Katia’s dream and my dream finally collided with one another.

“I didn’t kill him,” Shi Maria shouted at us, pushing her way through the memory ghost of Katia and Annie. She pressed her face right up to mine. Her eye was open and shining, but I felt nothing from it. “I didn’t kill him! I didn’t kill him! I did not, I did not, I did not!”

“Bitch, you swallowed me whole,” a new voice said.

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ROSETTA

Baroness Victory: I was able to check the financial feed during the adjudication while we waited for that idiot Ferdinand to come down out of the rafters. It appears the money has reached the intended destination. Obviously we can't see what's really happening out there anymore, but we can still see transactions and their amounts. I can't decipher what the gods is happening in the Naga system, but there was a transaction more than big enough to suggest your people were able to purchase two ships, despite the apparent chaos in the system. Assuming your *Homecoming Queen* starship follows your orders and shoots down that yacht, our transaction is done.

Rosetta: Thank you, Baroness. I know your sister would be proud. The captain who remained on board knows his duty and will follow through if he hasn't already. Now what the hells is going on with the War Mages?

Baroness Victory: Just because we have dealings together outside the dungeon doesn't mean I am not taking my duties as adjutant seriously. I told you before I will *not* cheat nor will I help you cheat. Any information I give about in-dungeon rulings must go through warlords Carl or Donut. That said, everything is fucked. That's what's going on. We're all going to die because the AI is insane.

Rosetta sighed with relief. No matter what happened next, her primary mission was complete. If it all fell apart now, it wouldn't be her fault.

Still, despite her absolute hatred for the orcs, she felt ill about the transaction. The yacht they'd agreed to kill in exchange for the pin number contained several children. Orc children, yes, but children nonetheless. And

now that Stalwart was dead, one of those children was the new king of the Skull Empire.

Assuming York actually did his duty and didn't decide to write a poem or something instead, once he shot down the orc yacht, that would leave Princess Formidable in charge of the Skull Empire, assuming she was still alive somewhere on Earth's surface. And if *she* was dead, then it would be the Maestro, despite him being supposedly disowned by his father.

There were no circumstances in which Baroness Victory would end up in charge of the Skull Empire, not unless she first killed about 1,000 other nobles spread across the galaxy, so her motivations in helping the Pacifist network were a mystery to Rosetta. This deal had been brokered between Porthus and Victory long before Victory was even chosen as an adjutant. Once again, he seemed to be a few steps ahead of everybody else.

Porthus, I hope you know what you're doing.

If all was going to plan, Porthus, along with all the others, namely the families of those who'd entered the dungeon, would be boarding the generation ship they just bought with their stolen funds and hauling tail to the Plenty system, where they would give one of the expensive ships along with the rest of the money to the goats in exchange for passage to the "forbidden" gate of the Impetus Point, the tunnel node that reached the furthest point in the known galaxy. And from there they would set out and get as far from the center system as possible, only to return when and if the inevitable wars and chaos settled.

So far, everything had occurred exactly as Porthus predicted. At least, everything *outside the dungeon* had gone as Porthus had predicted, which was more than a little disconcerting. It was that woman, Rosetta knew. The witch that had his ear. The Apothecary. Rosetta wasn't one to believe in anything supernatural outside the confines of an enhancement zone, but there was something spooky about that creature. Rosetta didn't trust her, and she'd told Porthus thus multiple times.

She's on our side, Porthus had said.

Is she? Rosetta had asked. *How can you be so sure? There's a reason why people don't trust collective minds, Porthus. They're always five steps ahead of everybody else. There's a reason everybody hates this thing. Do you see how they portray her in the dungeon? She's a tentacle monster that takes over minds. It's fucking terrifying. Who knows what she really looks*

like. For all you know she's leading our families to her prime body so she can eat us, like some sort of fucked-up food delivery service.

You'll have to trust me, he'd said.

I do trust you. I don't trust her. It. Whatever we're supposed to call her. I don't know what's in it for her.

She most definitely prefers to be called her. And I do know what's in it for her. She has a very good reason for all this.

What, then? What is it?

I can't tell you, he'd said with that stupid, smug smile of his. I promised her I wouldn't tell you. Not if you want to go into the dungeon. Because if you know and enter the dungeon, then the local AI might learn. And if the local AI learns, then the Eulogist will eventually know.

What the fuck does that even mean? Isn't the Eulogist dead?

It means you need to trust me.

And that was the problem, wasn't it? She rubbed her leg, thinking hard. She trusted Porthus with all her heart. As much shit as she gave him, he was *always* right. He'd picked her up after she'd finally escaped the dungeon, after cycles and cycles as a merchant in the mercenary guild, being forced to grit her teeth and work with the filthy bastards who played faction wars, including then-Prince Rust himself, who didn't even recognize her.

And why would he?

He'd killed Brooks with that goddamned whip of his. Faction Wars had been over, and the orcs had made the transfer to the Scolopendra Club. And even then, standing on the other side of the glass, they'd mocked them, the crawlers who'd given everything to survive those horrible days. They'd taken the librarians and other NPCs, and Brooks had tried to stop it. In his rage, Brooks had cast spell after spell at the portal screen. And on the other side, the orcs had laughed and laughed. Rust, still laughing, had stepped back through the portal, lassoed Brooks, and pulled him into the glass, which had cut him right in half. It had been so casual, so fast. Brooks had died immediately.

But Rosetta remembered. She would never forget. She relished that moment when she used the whip to decapitate the old orc.

Tipid: Shouldn't we be doing something? Are we just waiting for Donut to figure out how to safely break apart that battle formation? And what about Harpocrates? That crawler distracted him, but he's

turning back toward the tower again. It sounds like Yarilo is on the move again, too.

Rosetta: There's nothing we can do for the moment. Just stand by. I've ordered Li Na to assist the NPCs, but she is currently in a fit of hysterics over the death of her brother. Carl is free of the Madness castle, and he will likely address her soon.

Justice Light: We need to move on the war mage threat immediately. They have the Gate. I do not understand why they are not allied with the other NPCs. I do not understand why that Residual is their warlord. We do not know their plans, and that is dangerous. They are going to ruin everything.

Rosetta: Look. I do not disagree, old comrade. I don't relish dying here, but we all knew what we were getting ourselves into. We knew winning Faction Wars was a long shot. Our goal is and was to show the universe this cruelty will no longer be tolerated, and no matter what happens next, I think our message has already taken seed. Perhaps these mages winning, no matter what their motives are, is not such a bad thing. It will be quick for us, and all the remaining mercenaries and leaders will be dead, which is beyond what we even imagined.

Justice Light: I am not done yet. We need to fight.

Rosetta: With all the crawlers dead, the Ascendency will immediately kick off, and Rectrix will get to work. And perhaps after all this, York and Rectrix will survive. If we pull off some miracle, and the crawl continues even longer, we risk the AI gaining even more strength.

Which is what that Apothecary thing wants, she didn't add.

But even as she thought that, Rosetta was filled with doubt.

Agatha. Why was that Agatha creature the warlord of the war mage team? How in the name of the gods had that even happened? It didn't make any sense.

It was already known that the strange "human" was a residual with a knack for disappearing and reappearing at just the right moment. And even though they tried to erase her from the feed, she'd grown quite the following. But now it was clear she was the *other* kind of residual. The more rare kind that was more in line with the Nebulars, who worshiped the Eulogist. And that made Agatha the enemy of the Apothecary, the galaxy's biggest advocate for shutting down the center system.

And while Rosetta didn't trust the Apothecary, she trusted this residual thing less. Her initial, gut instinct had been to let them win, but Justice Light was correct. They didn't know what their true motivations were. Why were they trying to kill everybody? Why were they suddenly trying to end the crawl as quickly as possible? And most importantly, why was the local AI allowing this to happen?

We should have hunted her down and killed her. The moment Rosetta had learned there was still one of those residual things pinging around the dungeon, she should have made certain it was removed. It hadn't seemed important at the time. Residuals were always in the dungeon. They were harmless.

She was filled with doubt about what they should do.

Neither Tipid nor Justice Light knew anything about Porthus's plans other than sending them here to assist in the chaos. For them, that was enough. Their revenge was the same as the others. Coming here and helping the current crawlers, this time willingly, was their last, great statement to the cruel galaxy which had ignored them for too long. As Carl had so bluntly put it, *I will break you.*

Or at least, she *thought* coming here was going to be enough for the others. Justice Light had some project he was working on. Whatever it was, Porthus didn't know about it because he would have told her. Porthus told her everything. Almost everything.

Justice Light: Rosetta, you are the most stubborn person I have ever known. But I need you to trust me in this. We need to get that gate back. We need to win this day. We need to move fast. Once those defensive towers spin up, we will be in dire trouble.

She sighed and looked again at the battle map. There were only four teams left, not including these war mages. The NPCs, the Princess Posse, the Dream—which was as good as defeated, and the Reavers.

Even before the dungeon, Rosetta grew up in a world where showing kindness was viewed as weakness. Still, she felt kindness toward Justice Light. And Tipid. And Carl and Donut and all the others who fought so hard for what they believed despite the overwhelming odds.

Was it ever okay to stop fighting? Was there grace in saying, *I have made my mark, and now it's time to rest?*

She thought of her own mother, who'd come into the dungeon with her. She'd died on the first day, killed by goblins. *Avenge us*, was the last thing

her mother had said to her.

She thought again of that moment when she'd decapitated Rust. She'd almost missed the opportunity because Tipid, unaware of the plan with the bank, had tried to hide the orc's presence from her. Their original plan had been to get what they needed from Stalwart, but Rust's presence had made everything so much easier. And it was poetic, no?

Yet, yet... No amount of revenge would ever bring her mother back. It would never bring Brooks back. No matter how many orcs and orc children she killed, her people would still be dead. She hadn't even known Brooks. She'd seen hundreds and hundreds die before that point, yet that single death had broken her in a way she just didn't understand.

Cycles and cycles later, when she'd finally exited the dungeon, it was Porthus who'd given her the money and backing to make her first attempt at retribution. She'd been a fledgling journalist in the before times, one of the most dangerous, subversive jobs in her country. Her documentary, *The Other Side of the Glass*, had resonated, but like with all things that were hard to look at, people clicked their tongues in sympathy and then immediately looked away.

But they couldn't look away any more, and she was glad to be part of this, even if that meant she was likely to die. Like she'd said so many times, they knew what they were getting themselves into when they boarded *Homecoming Queen*.

Everyone who enters the dungeon, dies in the dungeon.

She'd watched Carl's speech to Donut about masks, and she'd wept. She'd wept at how hopeful it was. She'd wept at how cynical she felt in the moment. At the pity she'd felt for Carl and Donut, thinking how naïve it was that he thought she'd ever be able to remove that mask.

Was she wrong? Maybe so.

Porthus's plan, whatever it was, appeared to be on track.

Rosetta's job was done. No matter what happened here in the dungeon, it didn't matter anymore.

But Justice Light was her comrade. Her brother. And so were Carl and Donut and all the other crawlers on this floor. And, in the end, she trusted Porthus. She more than trusted him. She loved him, despite his unhealthy obsession with finding a missing crawler from his own crawl. Menerva.

And if Porthus trusted this Apothecary, then maybe Rosetta should fight against whatever this creature's enemies were planning.

Maybe it was a mistake, but nobody could ever fault her for fighting for her friends. There was poetry in that. too.

Colonel Rosetta: Comrades, sound off. The fight has moved to the city. The enemy has changed, and they have taken the castle of Larracos. We don't know how many there are, but we fight. We fight with all we have.

Class: Gazetteer

Race: Crest.

Birth Race: Crest.

Top Level: 91

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor.

Worked as a game guide and in the Desperado Club as a merchant renting mercenaries and occasionally was in charge of distribution of the dungeon newsletter. Upon dungeon exit became a journalist and filmmaker of some renown and eventually became host of the documentary series *Shadow Boxer*. Eventually returned to the dungeon to fight for the Princess Posse and to assist the mysterious Open Intellect Pacifist Network finance their great plan.

Author of the ninth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Alive.

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REMAINING TEAMS:

The Princess Posse

Team Retribution (castle occupied by War Mage Rebellion forces)

The Dream (castle occupied by Team Retribution forces)

The Reavers

The War Mage Rebellion.

Time until the War Mage Rebellion wins the castle: 5 hours, 57 minutes.

Time until the Larracos city defenses activate: 27 minutes.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I grumbled, seeing the report that the lava abatement had been interrupted by the *Bear Witness* spell. I’m not certain what the original plan had been to stop the literal river of lava pouring into Larracos, but whatever it was, it hadn’t worked. A slow-moving glob of molten rock was just about to enter Shanty Town, headed straight for the giant hole in the ground. I could just hear Elle right now, bitching about how it had been a bone-headed plan.

None of that was going to matter if we didn't get the war mages out of that castle.

I stumbled out the front of the former Madness stronghold just as the massive ball of flesh rolled into view, barreling toward us in the distance. The goddamned thing was huge, bigger than I was expecting. It was still dark and cloudy, and I could barely see anything, but a giant, quivering ball of rolling flesh with a god-sized dick schlopping out of it was pretty hard to miss. The rainbow, I noted, was now gone. The ball would reach the field of corpses in about a minute.

Despite my proximity to two gods, my Scavenger's Daughter patch did not activate. I assumed that would change the moment the two gods were freed.

There was a health bar over the battle formation, but it was still in the green. We'd have to kill the thing before everyone was freed.

Between us and the ball was where they'd dropped the corpses. There were thousands of them out there. The original plan had been for Bodi to retreat and have the pursuing forces walk right into the field of corpses just as Donut cast *You're Not Done Yet*. The map was nothing but a field of Xs.

Rosetta just sent out a message telling everyone to defend Larracos, but I didn't know how many people we actually had available to face the war mages as most everyone was in the ball. I'd sent out a dozen questions trying to figure out what was happening, and nobody was answering me.

It appeared Li Na had simply left her synergy tower, and nobody knew where she was. Donut and Ferdinand were going back and forth because Ferdinand wasn't able to get back into the Desperado Club and was now being chased through the city. Juice Box was missing as well. Britney, who'd been deep in Larracos at the time of the attack, was also running for her life.

It still wasn't clear what, exactly, was chasing them. I'd thought there had only been a handful of these war mage guys.

The new ruleset basically said it was every team for themselves. If we won, all the NPCs would die and vice versa. That was going to be a huge problem. But for right now, we needed to focus on getting those assholes out of the castle. And not to let Juice Box and Ferdinand die in the meantime.

According to the Peeling phase rules, if Juice Box and Ferdinand both fell, we wouldn't automatically lose. The war mages would still have to

hold the castle for six hours. But all the existing NPCs on Team Retribution would now just drop dead. And if that happened, there was no way we'd get to that castle.

Li Jun's sacrifice had bought Donut enough time to cast her spell once the ball reached the corpses, but she was going to have to flee after that. But would that even matter? She was marked for death by the mute god.

Carl: If Harpocrates continues to chase you after that ball breaks apart, get into a safe room until he goes away.

In theory, Harpocrates would stop chasing Donut the moment Meatus escaped that goddamned ball. But only in theory. I didn't want to think about what would happen if he didn't turn away. Li Jun had bought Donut enough time. Hopefully it would be enough.

Donut: I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER. I NEED TO COVER THOSE ENTERING THE CITY.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. You can't help anybody if you're dead.

Donut: I DON'T HAVE TIME RIGHT NOW, CARL. I'M TRYING TO SHOOT A WAR MAGE GHOUL THING. IT'S CALLED A ZAROGOTH. THEY'RE EVERYWHERE ALL OF A SUDDEN.

Carl: A what?

Donut: THAT'S WHAT IT SAYS THEY ARE. ZAROGOTHS. THEY'RE LIKE FAT, MOVING SHADOWS LEAKING OIL ALL OVER THE PLACE. THEY'RE EVERYWHERE, AND IT SAYS THEY'RE ALL ON THE WAR MAGE TEAM. I WANT TO TRY MINION ARMY ON THEM AFTER I DEAL WITH THE BALL.

Minion Army would freeze Donut in place for five minutes.

Carl: Absolutely not.

Mordecai: Oh, fuck me. Zarogoths are generated mobs. The war mages built a generator.

Rosetta: Donut, look for the antenna. It'll be inside of Larracos somewhere. It's what they're using to build them. Shoot the antenna, and the monsters will collapse. I don't know what it will look like, but this is a similar spell to the Remex quest you stopped on the third floor mixed with a ghoull generator from the train levels. Find the antenna, kill it, and the mobs will all die at once.

Donut: I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR.

Rosetta: We had these things during my crawl. It'll be something very, very hot. Probably the hottest thing in the city. It's made from a

soul crystal with an attached capacitor unit that's capturing souls and corrupting them. It's rerouting demon eviction, too. Look where the monsters are the thickest. If you shoot it, it'll explode, so be careful.

Donut: THE HOTTEST THING IS THE GIANT STREAM OF LAVA ABOUT TO ENTER THE CITY. SOMEONE SHOULD PROBABLY DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT.

Rosetta: Keep looking. It'll be hotter than that.

Tipid: Maybe Donut should start blowing up the city defense towers?

Donut: I ONLY HAVE TWO PAWS, TIPID.

Louis: Don't you have four?

Donut: LOUIS FOCUS ON YOUR OWN SAFETY RIGHT NOW.

Britney: Hitting the towers won't work. They are covered in protections. If she tries, I think they'll activate on their own early.

Baroness Victory: Britney is correct. Don't target the towers before they're active unless you want them all to turn on.

I started running full speed toward the rolling ball. Behind me, Dong, again mounted on Gonk, shouted and started to follow, leaving the others—Jamal, the two survivors from Burcu's team, along with Bigs and Rend—behind. Tuba, the crawler who'd almost died of blood loss, was saved at the very last moment once the *Conscription* was broken. We were miles and miles from Larracos right now, but there was a safe room entrance just down the hill. I sent a message to Jamal telling him to lead the others there and wait for me.

I needed to stay here for right now. Because Eris had turned off the *Witness* spell, they were all going to be awake once the ball broke. I was pretty sure we outnumbered them, especially now that I'd taken the Madness troops, but it was going to be chaos. Chaos with two gods mixed in.

We were going to have to scatter, but if I could rally enough crawlers, we could come back here and shortcut through the saferoom to Larracos and assist there in the fight against the war mages.

Shit, shit, shit. I glanced at the clock. A little over 25 minutes until the city defense system fell into war mage hands. I was starting to realize there was no way I'd get there in time. And once it turned on, we'd have five and a half hours to get them out of that castle. We were in fucking trouble.

While I was starting to understand *what* was happening with the war mages, I still didn't know *why*.

Carl: Victory, what can you tell me? Why aren't these assholes working with the NPCs? Don't they want the same thing? And where the hell did Agatha come from?

Instead of answering directly, the baroness suddenly cracked into existence next to me. I quickly passed her, and she grunted and started running alongside, despite my incredible speed.

"Their motivations are unclear, even to me," Victory said once she caught up. "They clearly did not anticipate Agatha would be named as a co-warlord, and the other leader, Akuma, does not like her. The system is going all in with them. They were just assigned an adjutant as well. Deng Bao, the grixist who was the orc adjutant. He's the only one who would do it. He is in Larracos with the war mages right now trying to unravel what is going on. That castle is still submerged, by the way. The war mages apparently can breathe underwater. Deng Bao cannot."

"Wait, Agatha is co-warlord?" I asked.

"Yes. If you look in your interface, you can see them listed now. Agatha is co-warlord, similar to what happened with Juice Box and Ferdinand. Ferdinand was added because the system didn't allow Juice Box access to the warlord menu. It's the same with Akuma. I do not know if he was consulted about those emergency action items. I do not know their plans. All we know is that they are fighting against the other NPCs and are trying to kill all of you as quickly as possible. They are surrounding the castle with their generated soldiers and are tearing that castle apart. Once those defensive towers turn on, you aren't going to get in there without a terrible cost."

"Yes, but why was Agatha chosen in the first place? I was ordered by Zev earlier not to even talk to her. That came directly from the Syndicate prime minister guy himself and now she's a goddamned warlord. Did the AI set that up? Why?"

Donut: OKAY, IT'S CLOSE ENOUGH. I'M GOING TO CAST NOW. EVERYONE LOOK OUT.

Ahead, the giant ball slowed. It was still about a quarter mile away. I skidded to a stop. Dong trotted up. He had his sock over his shoulder and had his lance out, as if he was ready to charge.

The form of Meatus waved back and forth, making the ball look like a massive sperm. The head of the member was inside the ball and supposedly still wrapped around that other god, whom I couldn't see at all. The ball pulsed, and now I could hear them as well, all screaming.

Holy shit, I thought the moment I heard them. Donut's plan had kept them from getting crushed to death, but this seemed barely better. The roar was like that of a crowd at a football game or concert. Nobody inside the ball was in the chat, so maybe they weren't truly conscious. Plus I knew from experience that when these things broke apart, all the individuals were mostly fine. Still, those screams were terrible to hear.

"I know this should probably be obvious, but what, exactly, is Donut's plan right now?" Victory asked.

"She hasn't told me," I said. "I'm assuming she's going to cast *You're Not Done Yet* on the corpses. They'll target enemy soldiers."

"You're not going to question her?" Victory asked.

"No. I trust her."

A figure rushed up and leaned against my side, panting.

"Rend. You're supposed to stay with Jamal," I said, reaching down to pat the tummy acher on the head.

He let out a deep giggle. Gonk the yak snorted at the giant meatball.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the horrifying shape of Jamal in the distance near the small building that was a saferoom entrance. I couldn't see the others, but he'd just sent a message that they were waiting at the door and that Rend had run off.

Another figure suddenly appeared next to Victory. This was another adjutant. One I hadn't met yet, and it was a type of alien I'd never seen before. The thing was a round, basketball-like creature standing upon three, long, multi-jointed legs. The round ball was covered in black dots that might be eyeballs. I was pretty sure this was a type of alien called a "tripod." I'd heard of them, but I'd never seen one before. They were supposedly completely without emotion, like extra asshole versions of Spock from *Star Trek*.

Former Prime Minister Fopsy.

Adjutant for The Dream.

This is a non-combatant observer.

The creature said nothing and scuttled off to the side. But the moment I saw him, I had a sudden revelation that should have been obvious. Epitome

Tagg had fled into the forest. He was outside when the Witness spell had been cast, meaning the warlord for the Dream was in the ball somewhere, too.

“Something’s coming,” Dong said, interrupting, pointing at the sky just as chaos broke out in front of us.

Two meteors shot across the darkness toward the ball of screaming flesh. They arced across the sky like artillery fire.

Donut: Those light things aren’t coming from me. There are four of them, and they came from inside Larracos! Two moving toward Carl, one moving toward Harpocrates, and another moving west. I think it’s headed toward where Louis is!

Another light—this one burning black and purple—shot across the darkness and intercepted the two meteors. It hit one, continued its momentum and hit the second, which angled off. This was followed by what looked like a magical explosion. In that moment the sky was lit, I saw that other, third light was Bianca, who appeared to have been injured in the blast. She opened her mouth in what might have been a howl if I could hear, pivoted in the night sky, and then plummeted out of sight, leaving a streak of sizzling purple smoke in the air.

As Bianca crashed, the remaining meteor that had been knocked off course did a loop-de-loop and then slammed directly into the ball.

Was it a missile? I couldn’t tell what that was. Nothing seemed to happen. Maybe Bianca had disarmed it?

At the same moment, Donut cast the spell. She did, indeed, cast a tower-enhanced version of *You’re Not Done Yet*. And the moment she did, the entire world in front of us burst into activity. The Xs on the map all started to blink.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed *another* Atrocity. Wow. What a naughty kitty. I sure hope she isn’t forced to cast a third.

Victory muttered something about the system-wide message subsystem degrading. I barely heard her as I watched the field in front of us, equally horrified and fascinated. The darkness started to rustle and swell. Before, I couldn’t see the corpses at all except on the map. But now I had a sense of them, like an unsteady sea under a new moon. A sea that abruptly and rapidly started to boil as the flesh was torn from the bodies of all the corpses, all at once.

Riiiiip. The sound came, louder even than the screams. It was the sound of tearing fabric. I was relieved I couldn't see it.

This was followed by a cacophony of zipping noises, like thousands of cable ties being pulled together, one after another. These were *not* in unison. This was the sound of the flaps of sentient skin as they started to fly through the air and onto the ball of flesh, each seeking a target.

The fleshers flapped onto the ball and started crawling around the outside, skittering like manta rays across the ocean floor. I watched, horrified as most of the dark shapes disappeared, slipping their way inside the ball, pushing themselves into the crevasses and cracks. They would be seeking those marked as enemies, which would be the Dream soldiers and those from the Reavers.

But, those enemies were still invulnerable while part of the ball. What would happen, then? How long would the fleshers last? The ball continued to pulsate and throb. The health bar didn't appear to move.

Donut: OKAY NOW I'M GOING TO START HITTING THE BALL WITH MISSILES TO BREAK IT APART. WATCH OUT BECAUSE EVERYONE IS GOING TO GO EVERYWHERE. I'LL ALSO CAST *BAD ATTITUDE* THE MOMENT THE BALL BREAKS. THAT'LL MAKE THE BAD GUYS PANIC. EVERYONE IS GOING TO HAVE TO RUN.

Carl: Wait, where is Harpocrates? Is he still moving toward you?

Rosetta: He'll be on Donut in about two minutes, but I think he'll turn back to you the moment Meatus is free from the ball. Donut, better cast now.

Fwum. The ball quivered from an impact of Donut's *Magic Missile*, followed shortly by the loud crack from the spell. The health bar went down a sliver, but it was still in the green.

Donut: HMM. MAYBE I SHOULD CAST *WALL OF FIRE* UNDER IT, BUT I DON'T WANT TO KILL THE FLESHERS YET OR HURT OUR PEOPLE WHEN IT BREAKS.

Rosetta: Fleshers are immune to fire, but that would definitely cook our people.

The entire ball shuddered as the fleshers continued to move across the surface, skittering as they searched out targets. The sight of them filled me with a deep, primal revulsion.

Something wet was on my face, and I rubbed my hand across my cheek. It came back red. Blood. It was literally misting blood in the air after the skin was ripped from all the corpses. Rend was making a slurping noise as he gleefully licked at the ground.

Another magic missile hit the ball. At this rate, it was going to take five minutes for her to kill the thing. We didn't have the time. I pulled a full-strength hob-lobber and extended my xistera. I was hesitant to throw a bomb at all of our allies plus two gods, but what choice did I have? We had to hurry.

Just as I prepared to toss, something happened, and I paused. The ball didn't break apart, but something burst from it, shooting straight up into the air, like the ball was a whale and the figure had escaped via a blowhole. It was clearly a person, which was just mystifying. The form rocketed straight up, waving their arms like they were trying to fly, hovered as they hit the apex, and then plummeted, slamming into the ground in the grass between us and the ball. The person did not get up, but they were clearly still alive. A single, slender arm rose in the air, as if they were calling for help. It was a human woman. On the map, she had the purple outline of an off-worlder, but she didn't have a glow that indicated she was a member of any army.

"What the hell? Who is that?" I asked, stepping forward.

"Uh," Victory said. "That's... that's a good question."

Fopsy the tripod adjutant spoke for the first time. "Interesting. There is nothing in the current ruleset that deals with this eventuality. I believe there is nothing to do except observe and report."

The woman started pulling herself toward us. I could see she was screaming, but I couldn't hear her. She was wearing armor that looked oddly familiar.

Holy crap, I thought upon realizing who this was.

Carl: Donut, did you cast *Laundry Day*?

Donut: NO.

A dark shape fluttered off the ball, falling and spinning like a leaf. Then a second and third. The creatures hit the ground and started scuttling toward her.

Fleshers. The first one pounced and wrapped around the woman's legs. Her scream went up in pitch, and now I could hear her as the flesher moved up her body, dissolving her own flesh.

"Should we help her?" Dong asked.

“No,” I said. “Wait until it kills her, and then I’ll take it out.”

“Oh, fuck my balls,” Victory said after a moment. “That’s Nami.”

Nami was the “influencer” who was supposedly driving Eris, the goddess of chaos who was inside the ball. Someone had removed the goddess’s soul armor, ejecting the driver, and that had somehow caused her to be rejected by the ball. But if Donut hadn’t done it...

“There’s a war mage in there!” I shouted. That’s what that meteor thing had been. Instead of a teleport, they’d cast some long-range jump spell. There had been two meteors, but Bianca had killed one and caused its head to explode. The thing had smacked into the ball and had... what? Managed to dig its way to Eris just to free her? What was their purpose? There were two gods here, and two of the war mages had come. They’d also fired toward the other two gods. So what were they doing? Another magic missile slammed into the ball. I prepared to toss my bomb, but I paused once again.

“Wait a minute,” I muttered, thinking hard. In front of us, the flesher of Nami the influencer stood to her feet. The skin was that of a dromedarian, much too big for her frame, and it draped over her like a ghost costume. It groaned as a second and third flesher attached themselves to the form. If we waited too long, another war mage would be born. I re-routed my hob-lobber and tossed it at the creature. *Blam!* It killed her and the fleshers all at once.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Victory suddenly burst out. She had her head in the air, eyes flashing. She turned and gave an incredulous look to Fopsy. “This can’t be real.”

“Bao has not called foul. It doesn’t appear there’s a rule against it,” the tripod said. “It would require the spell to be level 19 at least. Maybe 18, but they could fight it. And it won’t work against sponsored gods. That explains why they ejected her, but not how they got the spell so powerful in the first place.”

“They’re using potions, not the spell,” Victory said. “They’ll have to be hell-kissed versions. Those will be level 18. But, it also means using the potion is likely suicide for the caster if the level disparity is too high.”

“Interesting,” Fopsy said. All the eyes on the adjutant’s round body twinkled as he moved through his menus, glittering like a disco ball. “Ahh, I see. You are correct. They traded the Gate of the Feral Gods with a minion at the Midnight Market in exchange for five of the potions.”

Victory made a *tsking* sound. “Of course. Stuff like that always leaks into the market.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, dread rising. “They traded away the Gate of the Feral Gods? To who? For what?”

Samantha: A WAR MAGE JUST CAME OUT OF NOWHERE AND TOSSED A CONSCRIPTION POTION ON YARILO, AND IT WORKED! BUT THE MOMENT HE CAST THE SPELL, THE WAR MAGE GUY JUST BLEW UP! IT RUINED MY PLAN TO USE YARILO TO SAVE LOUIS, AND NOW I GOTTA DO IT MYSELF! YARILO JUST TOOK OFF RUNNING! HE IS ALWAYS DISAPPOINTING ME. NOW I GOTTA MOVE ONTO PLAN B.

Holy fucking shit. The war mages were conscripting gods into their army. I examined, again, the enormous ball in front of us. There were two gods in there, locked away. The health of the thing was now in the red.

Carl: Donut, stop!

Li Na: Donut, do not break the ball apart.

Donut: WHAT? WHAT? AND WHERE ARE YOU LI NA?

If they managed to control one of the two gods in there, especially Eris, they could just end us all with a swipe. I took a fine healing potion ball, and I tossed it onto the battle formation with my xistera. The potion arced through the air and disappeared as it crashed against the wall of flesh. The giant thing commenced healing. I started to slowly back away. “Dong, Rend, back to the saferoom. Now.”

Li Na: I was installing my brother’s eye into myself. I also managed to stop the mage from getting to Harpocrates. I am not strong enough yet to stop the god on my own. He paused because of the deflector towers, but he’ll soon push past them to get to Donut. I suggest you run.

I sent a private message to Li Na, telling her to grab that potion off the corpse of the war mage, but to be careful with it. She didn’t reply.

Carl: Donut, can you still steer the ball? One of the two gods in there might be under control of the war mage team when you break it apart! Steer the ball back toward the city and then get out of the tower! If Harpocrates is still free, then hopefully he’ll keep the other gods in check.

Donut: CARL OUR FRIENDS ARE IN THERE, AND NOW IT’S COVERED WITH FLESHERS WHO MIGHT TURN AGAINST US

AT ANY MOMENT. I NEED TO BREAK IT OPEN NOW.

Carl: I know, but wait and listen. I'm trying to keep our friends safe for as long as possible. If the war mages are trying to kill us, then that god is going to kill them on their behalf. New plan. Keep the ball intact for as long as possible. So set its direction and leave.

Warlord Carl: Everyone who is free of that ball. Listen to Rosetta's orders. Get to Larracos. Get there now.

The two adjutants were completely ignoring me and in a rapid back-and-forth conversation.

Fopsy the tripod scuttled forward. "At first I thought her motivations were curious, but I do believe I understand them now in light of the news that the AI is rapidly spreading in influence. I suspect the residual in control of the war mage team isn't just trying to win Faction Wars and zero out the crawlers. She's trying to stop the ascendancy game as soon as possible as well."

"But why?" Victory asked. "They're usually trying to talk the AI into joining their religion or whatever they do. What's her purpose?"

Fopsy made a strange, clicking noise. "It's unclear what their normal intentions are, but this season is far from normal. Once the ascendancy is considered finished, assuming there are no crawlers left, it automatically triggers the system's shutdown and hibernation sequence. That's a hard-coded limitation, which allows elemental reclamation before it is woken back up. Now that the AI is spreading, this is a possible alternative to the failsafe. All of this makes sense if the residual now believes the local AI is a threat to the Eulogist. What I do not understand is how she convinced the war mages to assist her."

Victory grunted. "Based on that Akuma guy's reaction when they assigned her as co-warlord, I don't think they are assisting each other at all."

Fopsy regarded me. "I have additional theories, but I will not voice them in the presence of a combatant."

Ahead, the ball started moving again, rolling away toward Larracos. In the distance, a form shot into the air, bobbing a few times before it decided to follow. Bianca.

And that was when I noticed dozens of fleshers on the ground, hesitantly moving in our direction, furtively scuttling across the surface. They weren't supposed to attack me, but the pickings were suddenly thin.

One was already getting close enough for me to examine it.

Flesher. Level 1.

This is a skin ripped off a human named Derek Reilly. Derek was already dead when the skin was removed, though I suspect he would be happy to know all that moisturizing he did while still alive is much appreciated by the monster his skin has become.

If this thing is close enough that you can read this description, you, too, are probably going to soon appreciate Derek's respectable hygiene.

I would suggest a hasty exit.

"Yeah, screw this," I said, patting Rend on the head. He had not left my side. I turned back toward the saferoom entrance, and I ran.

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I BURST INTO THE SAFEROOM. I HAD TO WAIT FOR THE OTHERS TO PILE IN behind me. I spared a quick glance at Mordecai, who was sitting at the table with Ruby on his lap, reading a book. The cleaner bot hovered nearby and also appeared to be listening to the story. *Anne of Green Gables*, which gave me pause. My grandparents had that book in their home in Texas. I remembered my mom had said it was one of the few things from her own childhood that they'd kept when they'd moved.

I almost said something, but I held back, seeing how young Ruby clutched onto Mordecai, how she had her misshapen head on his shoulder. I had a sudden memory of Katia and Annie from the dream, and I realized this was the same thing. *He thinks it's over, and this is how he's choosing to spend his last few hours*. If Donut died, he'd be done. I wasn't sure exactly what would happen to him with the quarantine, but I knew he'd be out of the dungeon, and he would never see Ruby or any of the other kids again.

When Big Things happen on such a large scale, it's easy to forget sometimes that these Big Things are also happening to the little things in the world.

That was from a goddamned AI description way back on the sixth floor, yet it stuck with me.

We had to keep moving. We only had minutes.

The others finally finished entering the saferoom behind me. I quickly dialed to the Larracos gate using the doggie door.

Dong Quixote was no longer with us, and that was because he was riding Gonk. He'd go straight to the pet stables, and I ordered him to Shanty Town instead, which had an appropriate exit for the swamp yak.

The door in front of me beeped, indicating it was ready. "Rend, you go first. The stairs are steep. Jamal, hold up the rear but don't jump off the tower. Your new legs are strong, but they're not that strong." Rend grunted. Bigs the slug now sat atop the meatball's head. The other two survivors of Burcu's team—now both official members of the Princess Posse whether they liked it or not—continued to sob, but they followed along. "Stay with me, guys," I said. They didn't respond, but they followed.

We went back outside, coming to that same tower in the middle of the Larracos College of Magic that we'd first used all those days earlier. The tower was a dorm for professors, and the saferoom exit took us into the cafeteria on the top floor. This was where we all were gathering. The college had a front gate, and the NPCs had managed to keep the grounds under their control as the zarogoth mobs pressed their attack. We stepped out into chaos.

Entering Larracos. City of Broken Dreams.

You are on the 50th level of the city. You are on the campus of the Larracos College of Magic.

Warning: This city is under siege.

Warning: The city defense system is powering up and will target you.

Time until the towers are operational: 13 minutes.

We hurried down the spiral stairs as I took it all in. From this height, I could see multiple fights at once on all the lower rings, despite the billowing smoke. The monsters were all tall, strangely fat, obsidian creatures. They looked like overweight ghouls from the train floor, but completely black. They were too far for the info box to pop up, but when multiple stood together, it was impossible to tell how many there were. They used their claws and what appeared to be a short range, magical ray attack. As I watched, a stairwell down and across the way detonated as someone blew the fuses, causing a whole mess of the strange mobs to plummet away. Fires burned everywhere. Smoke filled the city. The waterfall across the way had stopped. I knew the slow plod of the lava flow would soon replace it.

The tower next to this one—the same tower I’d watch them build when we’d first arrived—hummed ominously. The massive jewel atop the pillar glowed red. I spared a quick glance at the thing, which had a countdown timer over it.

City Defense Tower Number 22. Red Jeweled.

This is an automatic tower.

You may not examine this tower’s defenses.

Fires a level-five *Fire Lance* at a target within range.

This tower has been upgraded a maximum of five times.

Two times range enhancement.

Three times speed enhancement.

At its current speed, this tower will fire ten times per second.

I continued to hurry down the stairs, Rend and Bigs running in front of me. The meatball barely fit on the spiral staircase. The two others followed as Jamal’s spider legs click-clacked on the stairs.

Carl: Donut, where are you?

Donut: I’M STILL IN THE NEST TOWER, CARL.

I instinctively looked up, and despite the angle, I could see the top of the Nest tower, glowing in the dark, hovering ominously over the entire funnel. We’d deliberately built the tower as close to the border with Larracos as possible, which would give Donut a clear view of most of the city if she needed it.

The moment I looked up, I received a terrifying update.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger’s Daughter has opened her eyes.

You are now within range of the god Harpocrates.

Temporary effect from Harpocrates:

Level 15 *Pied Piper* skill.

Carl: Goddamnit Donut, get the hell out of there. The god is here!

Donut: I CAN SEE THAT, CARL. HE’S STOPPED AT THE EDGE OF THE CITY AND ISN’T COMING IN. I THINK IT’S THE DEFLECTOR TOWERS! HE CAN’T SEE ME ANYWAY. I’M WEARING THE STUPID GHOULIE SUIT AND AM INVISIBLE. THE BALL SHOULD BE HERE SOON.

Carl: You’re on top of the biggest goddamned tower on the floor shooting magic missiles. Of course he sees you.

Rosetta: Donut, I'm with Carl. Harpocrates hasn't cast his worst spells because he's generally a good guy. He doesn't want to level the town if he doesn't have to. But he's still a god. He's already angry. At any second he's going to cast a level-20 *Sonic Boom*. You need to get out of there.

Donut: I SHOULD PROBABLY MENTION THERE'S ANOTHER GOD GUY COMING, TOO. I THINK THAT'S YARILO. HE'S STILL A WAYS AWAY. HE AND THE BALL WILL ALL GET HERE AT THE SAME TIME.

Li Na: Harpocrates hasn't entered the Shanty Town because he has been stopped by a pair of changelings in the form of ogre basilica guards. It appears the ogres with golden skin have the ability to stop gods from passing a threshold, and it also appears gods are not willing to attack them. They are standing firm. Hopefully they, too, won't needlessly die. Donut, finish your task as quickly as possible.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and moved into the crowd. Most of the people here were with Team Retribution, but we did have a handful of crawlers mixed in. If there was any organization to the group, I didn't see it. I started to push my way to the front.

A group of Semeru dwarves, all with their ornate parade armor, stood at the front gate to the college, pushing back a rush of the shadowy mobs who were trying to fight their way inside. The gate pushed open, and several of the large, strange mobs surged toward the crowd.

One of the dwarves screamed as an orange ray shot from the zarogoth's mouth. The dwarf fell onto his back, and the mob started to laugh, the sound not unlike the giggles from Rend. Another Semeru hacked at the mob, slashing a deep rent in the bulbous stomach of the monster, and black liquid gushed out, causing the monster to deflate and then die. The fallen Semeru, who'd now been drenched in the black oil, continued to writhe in pain on the ground.

A magic missile arced down from Donut's tower and landed in the midst of the ghouls, causing them all to blow back. Fire erupted amongst the mobs. The dwarves shouted and pressed the attack, hacking at the fallen creatures, who disappeared in a burst of black oil when they died. The oil, when exposed to fire, seemed to burn, but quickly.

I focused on one in the moments before he was killed.

Zarogoth. Level 50.

These leaky edgelords can also be called either Sludge Ghouls or Sausage Golems. I decided to rename them Zarogoths because the name is much more appropriate. It's the sort of name a weird, socially stunted kid—whose real name is Stan Jr. or some bullshit—would bestow upon himself, all the while posting memes with skulls and motorcycles and guns on the internet, all with phrases like “Betray me, and I'll become you're (sic) worst nightmare” blah, blah, blah. The sort of kid who threatens his mom when his friends are around but still needs a babysitter. He brags about how he's going to get rich because of crypto but can't even pass basic algebra. He's banned on Roblox. You get the idea.

He's pretty easy to drop, but holy crap is he annoying.

Anyway, a zarogoth is a generated mob. They are created by capturing rising or falling souls via a soul crystal, rerouting the energy through a corruption spell, and then mixing it all together, which turns it all into an oil-like soup. They shove all the goo into what's basically a translucent, humanoid-shaped sausage casing made of a bunch of gross shit I won't relate here.

The resulting creatures are *not* considered undead. They aren't technically ghouls. Nor are they precisely golems, either. While souls are used to make them, they do not retain any sort of personality of the fallen. Nope. These assholes just come out this way. They are disposable ground troops with a sadistic streak. They're easy to kill once you figure out how they work, but don't underestimate these guys. They can be made quickly, attack in swarms, and their pain ray attack is no joke. Some even have the ability to reshape themselves and can cast pain-inducing dreads. Piercing their skin causes them to start to leak, but they won't die until they've lost 51% of their liquid.

Oh, and they smell really bad, too.

I could see that the secret to killing them had already spread amongst the NPCs. Slashing them on the lower parts of their bodies caused the black liquid to quickly drain away. They were a menace, but not as terrible as I first thought. Their purpose was more to delay us, which was working.

Donut: IF YOU ARE GOING TO MAKE A MOVE, YOU BETTER HURRY. IN ABOUT TWO MINUTES, THAT RIVER OF LAVA IS GOING TO FALL OVER THE EDGE. I DIDN'T KNOW LAVA COULD MOVE SO SLOW.

I instinctively looked up, but it was all just smoke. Up a level and across the way, an on-fire crawler or NPC fell, screaming, to their death.

This is war, I thought. This is war.

Donut: WAIT. WAIT. I THINK I SEE THE ANTENNA THING! I CAN ONLY SEE THE REFLECTION OFF THE BUILDING ACROSS THE WAY, BUT I THINK IT'S INSIDE THE PICCADILLY! THE THEATER! THE ONE ON THE 9th LEVEL OF THE CITY. THEY PUT IT WHERE I COULDN'T SEE IT FROM UP HERE!

Rosetta: Shoot it. Shoot it now!

Donut: I DON'T THINK I CAN. THE ANGLE IS WRONG. I CAN ONLY SEE IT BECAUSE OF THE REFLECTION, AND I CAN SEE THE SHIMMER OF A SHIELD AROUND IT. THE LAVA IS GOING TO LAND RIGHT IN FRONT OF IT IN A MINUTE, BLOCKING IT EVEN MORE.

Carl: Okay, good. You've found it. Now get the hell out of there. Don't waste time. Jump. Jump straight to the college. Do it before that god breaks in. Stay invisible. Tell me when you're here.

Ahead, the gate pushed open, and several new creatures lurched into the courtyard. It was a horror show of monstrosities of all shapes and sizes, and for a terrifying moment, I thought we were about to get overrun. But then I saw the indicators over them. Team Retribution. And not just that, but officers. Changelings. The center beast pushed through the entrance, looking about. She caught eyes with me.

Juice Box.

I also spied Britney in the midst of the group. And not just her, but Ferdinand was with them as well, on top of Britney's head. The warlord cat was all poofed out and screaming. He was wearing the bowler hat we'd given him in trade at the start of the floor.

Juice Box was in the form of a hulking, armor-covered beetle thing called a dynastes. She was like ten feet tall and covered with scythes. I rushed toward them, looking up at the beetle. Behind them, more of the zarogoths surged. The dwarves went back to work.

We had less than ten minutes.

"Juice Box!" I called, rushing up. "Donut found the generator. We need to push to the railing. If we can get there, I will have line of sight. I can start tossing bombs on the Piccadilly Theater! I have a few waffle makers in my

inventory, and it should work. Where are the actual war mages? Are they in the castle?”

Juice Box had started to change form as I ran up. She turned to her regular human form and grabbed my shoulder, eyes wild. “Where’s Louis? Where’s my husband? He’s not answering me!”

I blinked at the question, surprised. In that fraction of a moment, I was hit with such a strange revelation. *She actually loves him. Holy shit.*

I wasn’t sure why it surprised me so much, but it did. An odd guilt washed over me. I never understood what that whole relationship was about, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, it still seemed... fake. Unnatural.

What was Louis’s status? He hadn’t messaged in a bit. The last we’d heard, he was hiding while being stalked by dog-like automatons in the Reaver castle. His last message had been that quip about Donut’s paws.

Carl: Louis, are you okay?

I held up a finger as Juice Box turned her attention back to the courtyard. “Clear them out!” she shouted. “I need protection spells on my left and right. Move to the barrier! We bomb the generator, and then we’re diving. We’ll be fighting in water, so prepare yourselves!”

Louis didn’t answer. I moved to the officer status screen, and he was still at full health, which was a relief. But then I saw something that gave me pause. He had two status notifications. I clicked over and drilled down.

Paralyzed.

Bound.

I cursed. Juice Box turned back to me, a worried expression on her face. I kept my finger up.

Carl: Samantha. I don’t know what’s going on, but Louis is in trouble and needs you.

Samantha: THERE ISN’T ANYBODY IN THE REAVER CASTLE AT ALL EXCEPT THE ROBOT DOGGIES, WHO ARE EVERYWHERE. THE HALLWAYS ARE SUPER SMALL AND COMPLICATED. I’M LOOKING FOR HIM NOW.

“He’s alive, but he’s in trouble,” I said to Juice Box. “We have someone trying to rescue him right now.”

“It’s not Samantha is it?”

“Uh,” I said.

Juice Box: Samantha, I have a form that is a fleshmancer. Return my husband to me in one piece, and I swear I will make certain you have any body you desire.

Samantha: THROW IN A HALL PASS NIGHT WITH LOUIS, AND YOU HAVE A DEAL.

Juice Box: I know who you are. Who you really are. I also know you've lost your mind and don't understand. I will help you. Just get him back for me, and I will do anything for you.

Samantha: OKAY, IT'S A DEAL. BUT IF LOUIS'S PASSIONS GET THE BEST OF HIM, I WON'T MAKE ANY APOLOGIES.

"Wait," I said out loud. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"We gotta move," Juice Box said, and she turned to the exit. "Form up! Make way for Carl!"

Bomo: Someone trying to come into the tower.

Toyotomi: I am securing the front entrance now.

Sergeant Bret S: Me and the other mages are coming down to help secure the door.

I almost missed the messages, mixed in with everything else as I armed a waffle maker in my inventory. Bomo and Sledge had gotten separated. Sledge was mixed in with the ball, and Bomo along with Toyotomi and several mages were in the lower part of the Nest tower, guarding Donut.

Carl: Guys, is it one of those zarogoth things? With all the protections, they shouldn't be able to get inside. If they do, cut them low on their bodies.

Donut: SOMETHING'S WRONG. IT SAYS I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER. I THINK THERE'S A NET AROUND IT ALL OF A SUDDEN. I TRIED TO JUMP, AND IT WON'T LET ME.

Toyotomi: No. It is a crawler. A woman with a dog. She's coming in.
This message is from a deceased mercenary.

Sergeant Bret S: We need backup! Backup!
This message is from a deceased crawler.

Bomo: Will stop her now.
This message is from a deceased mercenary.

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, I'D EXPERIENCED SO MANY MOMENTS OF pure, unadulterated terror, I'd lost count. I'd become pretty good at examining a situation and immediately reacting to it. I'd gotten so good at it, in fact, that most of my reactions to sudden surprises were 100% pure reflex. I trusted my instincts because if I waited just another millisecond, oftentimes it would be too late. Or worse, the utter terror of the moment would overwhelm and paralyze me.

The problem was, my instincts sometimes were only half-formed, and by the time I realized I'd done something incredibly risky or insane, it was much too late to do anything about it. And because the formation of terror at certain situations was now delayed to make room for these immediate reactions, the *holy shit* half of my reaction and the I-probably-should-have-thought-this-through half of my reaction sometimes occurred at the exact same time.

This was how I found myself floating in mid-air above Larracos on my way up to save Donut mere seconds after I received the final messages from Toyotomi and Bomo.

I didn't think. I moved.

They hadn't yet finished clearing out the mass of zarogoths between us and the railing. I didn't care. I ran, pushing past Juice Box and the Semeru dwarves, punching a zarogoth out of the way as I reached the railing. I pulled the final *Levitation* potion I had in my inventory, and I drank it just

as dozens of arms reached for me. I shot straight up in the air, pushing the dangerous-as-fuck spell to the limit. The apex of the spell actually brought me up and out of Larracos, but I was still stuck in the middle of the funnel with a good 100 meters from me to the edge of Shanty Town.

My original plan was to carefully aim and then toss the massive-payload waffle maker bombs on the theater housing the generator for the zarogoths. Instead, I just took the entire contents of one of my inventory folders—a folder titled **Shit Just Hit**—and I dropped it all at once in the general direction of the Piccadilly. The payload included about 20 waffle makers, two no disassembles, a pair of the anti-personnel cheese cutters, approximately 500 impact hob-lobbers, and more sticks of dynamite than I could count. I dropped them all, all at once, and then I activated *Walk on Air* and made a mad dash for the lip of the city, hoping my speed would get me there before the skill would run out.

It was right about this moment that I realized my bone-headed idea was about to have some seriously negative consequences for everyone in the area. That, plus my *Walk on Air* didn't have enough juice to get me to the edge of Shanty Town. I rushed forward through the air, making it about $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the way before I dropped like a bucket of concrete, plummeting down to the mostly-abandoned 64th—or third ring down—of Larracos, crashing heavily onto the aluminum roof of someone's home. I stood, and using my *Climb* skill, I quickly shimmied up a pipe toward the 65th, which was home to multiple shops.

I was about halfway up this pipe when the bombs hit on and around the theater. The resulting blast and cacophony shattered every window in the area, even at this distance, and it likely completely fucked all the lower levels of Larracos.

Several pages of notifications appeared, including a massive, red **Warning. Your attack has activated the city defense system** notification followed by a ten-second timer. The walls shook with a secondary explosion, almost as big, and I knew I'd managed to take out the soul gem generator. The way I'd done it had probably been a mistake. A big mistake.

I didn't care.

Donut was alone, and I would do whatever it took to get to her. Whatever it took.

Across the way, A huge chunk of the top few levels of Larracos cracked and fell away, plunging into the city below. This was part of the aqueduct

infrastructure. A black and red glob of steaming lava oozed out over the edge, spreading out across the top of the 66th and 65th levels of Larracos, luckily on the other side of the ring.

I rushed across the 65th floor, climbing a building and then scaling the wall. I moved to the top, 66th level of Larracos, which was normally occupied by barracks and soldiers.

Donut: CARL, LUCIA IS IN THE TOWER! SHE'S COMING UP THE STAIRS!

Carl: I know. I'm coming.

Here, there were hundreds of NPCs I hadn't been expecting. These were children and shopkeepers who were fleeing the fighting. They were in the process of scrambling up the stairs into Shanty Town and diving into shops as the city's network of 100+ defensive towers finished spinning up. To my left, a green-gemmed poison splash tower let out a *thwum!*, shooting a glob of green light. It was aimed downward, deeper into the city. To the left of that, another, red tower started rapid-firing fire lances, also deep into the city. All around, the NPCs started to scream as they dove into the closest structures or finished scrambling up the stairs.

Warning: A tower has targeted you using its Inexorable skill. It will not stop firing on you until one of you is paste.

A tiny crosshairs symbol appeared in my vision, meaning I'd been locked on.

Across the way, I watched in horror as the tower—this one a black-gemmed, damage-enhanced gale strike tower—started walking its way across the upper level, arcing toward me. Each shot sounded like someone pounding a bass drum, and each fist-sized blast of air hit with such force, it punched a hole straight through the ground, shattering buildings and carts and anything else in its way. *Wap, wap, wap.* Cobblestones and wood chipped and shattered as the destruction marched toward me. I dropped a smoke mantle and scrambled up the side of a barracks building, ran across the roof, and jumped, rolling to a stop just outside the city.

Entering Shanty Town.

The tower, which reached above the edge of the border, didn't stop shooting at me. The moment I appeared above the smoke, the gale tower started its slow turn in my direction while a second tower, this one a yellow hobble tower, belched out a beach ball-sized glob of gelatinous goo. I dove

and rolled, landing in a shallow ditch behind a residence. If the yellow goo hit me, I'd be immobilized. The yellow tower did not seem to fire again, but the gale tower continued to shoot, smashing into and through the building between it and myself, punching hole after hole in the wall, showering me with wood.

It couldn't reach me at this angle, but I needed to keep moving.

Donut: SHE'S SHOUTING FOR MONGO! BOMO AND THE OTHERS ARE DEAD!

Carl: Delay her any way you can. She can't teleport, so she has to go up the stairs. We prepared for this. Remember? Donkey Kong. Do Donkey Kong. I'm going to come up behind her. Don't stop rolling the barrels when I get there.

Donut: YOU HAVE TO GET THE WAR MAGES! THE CASTLE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME.

Carl: I am coming, Donut. Donkey Kong. Start it now.

The Donkey Kong move was an expensive, last-ditch defense added to the interior of the tower. All the manned synergy towers had similar rules as the castles, in that there had to be a path to the main room. But that didn't mean we couldn't make that path dangerous as fuck. When Donut hit a switch and activated Donkey Kong, the stairs disappeared, turning into a ramp. Barrels of various types would start rolling down the hall.

Across the way, I finally caught sight of Harpocrates for the first time. The god was huge, standing just a few hundred meters away from the edge of the tower, gesticulating wildly at the pair of ogre guards standing at its feet. The deity towered over everything, taller even than the Nest tower. He was slim, younger-looking than I expected, and other than the fact he was a goddamned kaiju, he looked mostly like a regular human. He wore the white with golden robes, but they were torn and filthy from his fight with his own penis. The front of the robe was stained red, presumably an added visual display to remind everyone that he'd had his shlong stolen.

The god's entrance into town was blocked by a pair of ogres standing side-by-side at the edge of town, looking up at him. These were two of Juice Box's changelings. From the map I could see there were more changelings there as well, who'd fanned out on the ground on either side of the god, like they were trying to intimidate the thing. I was pretty sure the god didn't even notice them.

As I watched, the god's attention moved away from the ogres and the tower and to the massive ball of flesh barreling toward it. The ball would be here in minutes.

Carl: Guys, Donut needs help. There's a goddamn anti-escape trap net across the nest tower. How do we get rid of it?

Mordecai: Working on a solution now. Normally the spell works for ten minutes. If Lucia cast it, I don't know if there's a way to easily dispel it without a *Dispel Magical Snares* scroll or spell.

Britney: Holy shit, Carl. Juice Box is pissed at you. You dropped the monsters but activated the towers! We've had to retreat back into the college!

I ignored this. I sent a message to Li Na, demanding to know where she was. She didn't answer.

A form jumped into the small trench next to me, coughing in a cloud of dust. I swirled, preparing to smash it.

Ferdinand.

"Why are you lying down on the job?" Ferdinand demanded. The orange cat was shaking with fear, and the end of his tail was scorched, like he'd barely missed getting skewered by a fire lance. His bowler hat sat cockeyed on his head. "Kitten is in trouble!"

"You shouldn't be here," I growled, peeking over the edge of the ditch. The nest glowed as a few of the upper-level defensive towers focused on it, pounding fire and more gale strikes at it.

As I stared at the tower, a notification popped up.

Nest integrity at 97%.

The sound of the firing towers rose in volume. Some of our own defensive towers were now engaging the Larracos towers. The ones on our side didn't have nearly as many protections, and they were deteriorating rapidly. But some of the ones in Larracos were now standing in lava as it spread unevenly, and they, too, had health bars over them.

A new pang of guilt hit me. Li Jun had been in charge of these towers. Now they were probably on automatic mode. I quickly pulled up the tower menus to look. I could fully control them from the menu.

There wasn't time to grieve the loss of Li Jun, nor did I have time to manually control the towers myself. It was pandemonium. Explosions; the crack of constant lightning and thunder; and the strange, sci-fi *thwum* of

unique towers all mixed in together, filling the night air with the sound of chaos.

“We gotta save her,” Ferdinand said, now having to shout.

Donut: THE BARRELS ARE MAKING HER MADDER! I THINK SHE CAN AMPLIFY HER VOICE LIKE I CAN. SHE’S CRYING AND TALKING TO THE STUPID DOG, WHO’S SLIPPING AND SLIDING. SHE’S STILL COMING, BUT IT’S SLOW. I’M GLAD WE DID THE COLLAPSIBLE STAIRS.

I spared another glance at Harpocrates. Somehow Ferdinand’s bravery, despite his overwhelming fear, eased my own. *Breathe. Breathe.* I was starting to see the whole picture again. I had an idea.

I’d left Rend behind at the college of Larracos. I debated for a moment, then I decided to activate *Hi-Yo Silver*. The thing was practically indestructible, and the towers generally avoided shooting at pets. Hopefully summoning him to this spot wouldn’t hurt him too bad.

If it worked, he’d get magically pulled toward this position, but it was going to take a minute, and I would probably be gone by the time he got here. That was okay. He’d be out of Larracos.

Behind me, the gale tower hadn’t stopped its deliberate firing at my own position. It was locked onto me and would continue to fire in my direction until I was out of range or dead. At the moment, the angle was bad, and all it could manage was to shower dirt over me.

The entrance to the Nest tower was about 100 meters to our left. I knew invisibility potions didn’t protect against the towers, and smoke only helped nominally. The black towers had a slow turning radius which meant I would be okay as long as I zig-zagged.

I then sent a quick note to Donut.

To Ferdinand I said, “Listen. You go into that tower with me, you’re toast. So you gotta stay right here. What you did was very brave, but we need you alive. Juice Box needs you alive.”

“Juice Box hates me. She’s meaner than Bill.”

I didn’t know who Bill was, nor did I care at the moment. I put my hand on the orange cat. He was so much more coarse than Donut. He was skin and bones, and he cowered under my touch. “Trust me on this, dude. You’re on her team because you got a raw deal, but you’re like me and Donut. You’re from Earth. *I* want you alive. And so does Donut.”

“Really? You really think so? Because Kitten is still a little saucy about that time I shot a lightning bolt at Mungo.”

“Yeah, you should probably learn his proper name before you... oh shit, run!”

The ground underneath me shifted. The gale tower had fired so much, it was digging a ditch under my position.

“Hide!” I shouted at Ferdinand as I popped up and ran. I waited for the tower to shift, and then I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase*, pushing in the opposite direction, moving sideways and putting a pair of buildings between myself and the tower. I hit the ground once the phase expired, and I ran. I had to run around the side of the tower, and I jumped through the broken-in door just as the gale blasts zeroed in on me.

The shots would now pound against the opposite wall of the Nest tower, but they wouldn’t get through. Not while the shield was still up.

Entering the Nest Tower.

Warning: This tower’s integrity is at 74%.

You may manage this tower in the Warlord menu.

I spared a quick, sad glance for Toyotomi, Bomo, and the defending mages, all of whom were cleaved right in half with a spell.

Toyotomi was dead-dead. Bomo would supposedly regenerate on the 10th floor, but we no longer had his contract, and I didn’t know if I’d ever see him again.

Hi-Yo Silver successfully completed. Your pet has been summoned to your previous location.

Rend was now in Shanty Town where I’d been hiding. He was going to have to wait. I moved toward the tower’s curving stairwell, but I paused as someone rushed in behind me.

Li Na.

“Holy shit,” I exclaimed upon seeing her face. I’d heard her say she was “installing” Li Jun’s fake eye into herself, but the meaning hadn’t really hit me until that moment.

The front of the woman’s demonic face was covered with blood. She’d gouged her own eye out and replaced it with Li Jun’s celestial-quality eye. The eye would allow her to slow down time and move with incredible speed.

“Na,” I began. “Look I am so sorry about your brother. But we need to hurry. Donut...”

She held up her hand, stopping me. A chain grew from her shoulder, holding a glass bottle. A potion.

“Take it,” she said.

She dropped the potion in front of me, and I had to dive to catch it with two hands. The large, warm bottle was in the shape of a demonic head with no eyes and with multiple tentacles coming off it. The tentacles waved back and forth, despite the whole thing being made of glass. When I grabbed the bottle, the eyeless face started to scream. Several mouths upon the tentacles also began to scream. Within, a purple, bubbling potion roiled, rushing back and forth like a miniature hot tub. This was the potion I’d asked her to loot from the war mage who’d flown at Harpocrates.

Hell-Kissed Potion of *Conscription*, level 18.

This works like a regular potion of *Conscription*, but it has been hell-kissed. At level 18, it will work against pretty much any non-affiliated entities, regardless of their protections, including *most* deities. Most. It was brewed in the dark recesses of the Nothing by Krakaren Prime, who is said to yearn for domination, which was why she’d been banished there in the first place. She prepares for a war she considers inevitable. There’s an irony that the in-dungeon version of Krakaren has supplied these potions to the War Mages. Then again, now that this potion has found its way to your hands, maybe it’s not so ironic after all.

Conscription potions only work on the 9th, 12th, 15th, 17th, and 18th floors.

“I used Jun’s scroll of potion duplication on it,” Li Na said. She spoke with a dead, chilling calm. “I am going to use the original now on Harpocrates and then I will save Zhang, Elle, Katia, and the others before they, too, fall victim to your chaos.” She turned and left.

“Wait!” I called. “If the level discrepancy is too high, it’s dangerous for you! The war mage blew up!”

She did not wait.

Damnit. I didn’t have time to go after her. I turned back to what had been the stairs.

The interior, curving shaft had turned to a steep ramp. Rivulets of oil from the defensive barrels had already reached the bottom. The scent of fire filled the tower, and the walls crackled with electricity. There were multiple, magic-numbing effects to the interior stairwell once Donkey Kong was

activated. The barrels would still work, but most mages would be defenseless. Just from the smell in the air, I sensed that the anti-magic zone was only partially working. Most spells weren't supposed to work at all in here, but it seemed Lucia was powerful enough to break through.

Luckily, skills still worked. I activated *Sticky Feet*, and I started to run up the curving ramp.

"Stop doing that!" came Lucia's voice, echoing supernaturally in the tight, curved stairwell. "Gus. Get back up!"

I could tell by the sweeter, less raspy lilt to her voice that Lucia was in her magic-focused, beautiful woman form.

"Keep that disgusting dog away from me!" Donut shouted back, her voice also amplified. "I'm warning you, bitch!"

"Give me your dinosaur, and I will leave. It is justice I seek. Nothing more."

"Justice? There's no room for justice here. But there's plenty enough room in this world for another dead rottweiler!"

"Quit throwing barrels at Gus! You're ruining my revenge!"

Carl: I'm in the tower. Coming up now.

Donut: I HIT HER WITH THE *SLEEP* POTION BARREL, AND IT DIDN'T WORK! SHE'S CRAWLING UPSIDE DOWN ON THE CEILING OF THE STAIRWELL WAITING FOR HER DOG WHO KEEPS SLIDING AWAY FROM HER. SHE HAS HIM ON SOME SORT OF INVISIBLE LEASH. SHE BLOCKS EXPLOSIONS, TOO.

Carl: Focus on the dog. We gotta separate the two. Send a *Mute* barrel then maybe *Temporary Water Source* and fill the stairwell.

Donut: *MUTE* DOESN'T WORK ON HER. I HAVE A BETTER IDEA.

Wap. Wap. Wap. The gale tower was following my progress. I could hear it against the outside wall of the tower as I continued to ascend, like a battering ram against the exterior marble.

Donut: WATCH OUT, CARL! SHE THREW THE DOG BUT LUCIA GOT HIT, AND SHE'S TUMBLING DOWN!

And just a moment later, she appeared. I tried to jump aside as a screaming, twirling mass rushed toward me, rocketing down the ramp like a bobsled. It was Lucia and someone else. Donut's card from the 8th floor.

"Oof" I cried as I was hit dead on by the pair of combatants. The three of us continued to spin and slide as we twisted away.

I cried in pain as the armored crab legs of the screaming newcomer raked against my arms. Raul. Donut had finally summoned him. When he'd leveled up at the end of the previous floor, he'd jumped from level 70 to 110, and his card had been upgraded to mythic rareness. When he was summoned, he'd stick around for 10 minutes. Raul had been pretty strong before, but he was now significantly more powerful.

"Stop! Ow, please! Stop!" came Lucia's voice as I also tried to free myself.

Raul, too, was shouting angrily. "You dare challenge my master? You dare challenge Daddy Carl? The heavens laugh at your temerity, churl!" The crab's claws flashed as he tried to snap onto Lucia's legs. His voice was much deeper now that he'd "ascended" to the next cultivation rank or whatever. A shield sparked each time his powerful claws slammed down, showering sparks everywhere.

We hit the ground, all three of us now just caked in oil, spinning until we hit the wall by the door. All three of us broke apart and continued to tumble in the small entrance room.

Raul, quicker than either of us, did a backflip and landed on his legs with a shout. He snapped forward and grabbed the larger woman. He held her up in the air, clutched in his glowing claws. Her single, goat leg dangled from the side of his claw. She wasn't fighting back.

"Look at Daddy Carl! Look upon his greatness! You will kowtow, or you will suffer such a death that your ancestors will weep until the very end of days!"

"Please," Lucia said, her voice weak and scared. "I don't want to play anymore."

"That is not a proper submission! For crimes against the heavens, you have been sentenced to eternal death," Raul shouted. He snapped again, and her shield winked out.

"Please, please," Lucia said.

"Wait," I croaked as I pulled myself up. This was probably a waste, but I didn't care. A regular one might work, but I didn't care. I needed to be sure. I pulled that potion from my inventory. The one Li Na had just duplicated for me.

No. Not like this. Never like this.

Sometimes, we do what we have to do to survive.

I smashed the screaming, Hell-kissed *Conscription* potion against Lucia's head.

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THE POTION WORKED. A PINK GLOW APPEARED AROUND LUCIA'S DOT.

Raul lowered her and let her slide to the ground. The crab sneered.

"Daddy Carl is magnanimous today. Now you shall kiss his famed, alabaster feet and beg for forgiveness."

"Raul," I said. "Donut needs help. Go!"

Without another word, he scurried away back up the ramp.

"I'm sorry," I said, taking a knee in front of the woman on the floor. "If you've cast *Rubber* or any other spell to hurt us, I'm ordering you to cancel it out now."

Under Orders appeared over her head. The girl changed in an instant. Her terrified expression switched to a look of absolute malice. I sighed. I *knew* it. She'd been faking it. Whatever was going on with her, the influence of her dog took some time to fade. She'd been trying to fool me.

I looked into the warlord menu, and I could see an astonishingly long list of protection spells around her. She had what appeared to be 30 separate hotlist triggers as well, which was curious. I couldn't see those, but I knew she couldn't activate any if it meant to harm me. There were ways to break conscription, as the war mages figured out, but it was all but impossible during the first few days. Especially with this version of the *Conscription* spell.

"Turn off all your protections, too." I added. A moment passed, and the spells disappeared.

Wap, wap, wap. Outside, the gale tower continued to fire at me, and the pulses hit the wall. The Nest was at 45% integrity.

“Fuck you,” Lucia hissed. “I’m going to rip you into pieces.” Something appeared in her hand, and I startled. But it was a bottle of tequila. She took a long drink. Then she spit and lurched, as if to attack me, but she was stopped as if she hit an invisible wall. The spit of tequila sprayed to the side just as it magically caught alight, and she burned her own face. Her long, dark hair caught fire, but it quickly went out, filling the entrance vestibule with the stench of burning hair. She screamed and lunged again. Again, she was stopped from attacking me. This was followed by a string of insults that didn’t get properly translated from Spanish.

Carl: Donut, what’s happening?

Donut: THE DOG IS STUCK JUST BELOW THE ENTRANCE BARKING ITS STUPID HEAD OFF. I SMACKED IT WITH MY ASTRAL PAW SPELL, AND HE SLID DOWN A FEW MORE LOOPS, BUT HE’S STILL UP HERE. HE’S TRYING TO CAST HIS LIGHTNING ATTACK, BUT IT DOESN’T WORK WELL IN THE STAIRWELL. I’M GOING TO CAST A CLOCKWORK TRIPLICATE ON MONGO AND SEND THE TWO OF THEM DOWN THERE TO GET HIM.

Carl: Raul is coming, too. Wait until he gets there before you send in the clockworks.

I took a breath. *Okay, okay. We’re okay.*

“You need to call your dog off. Do it now. Use your leash spell or whatever and stop him. Summon him back here.”

At that, she laughed. “Do you think I have control over Gus? Do you think he listens to me? Especially at this distance. Your kitty and her dinosaur are dead, and they don’t even know it yet. You are too.”

“Call him anyway.”

“Gus,” Lucia shouted, her voice surprisingly amplified. It was a skill, not an item. “Gus, come.”

“Okay, good. Now turn off the net you have over the tower.”

“I can’t. It was a scroll. And it’s not on the tower. It’s on Donut, and she is bound to the room she is in. She will explode if she tries to teleport. It will run out soon.”

Warlord Message: Harpocrates has been successfully conscripted. Harpocrates, level 250 is now a member of the Princess Posse.

I quickly looked, and Li Na was still alive and at full health. I didn't know how she managed to do it, but she'd figured out how to use the potion without hurting herself. I turned my attention back to the problem at hand.

Carl: Let me know if the dog leaves.

Donut: HE'S STILL STUCK BARKING AND BARKING AND BARKING. THE BALL IS ABOUT TO ENTER THE CITY. WE GOTTA HURRY UP.

I smiled sadly at the crawler, and I sat on the ground next to her. Through the stench of burned hair, I could smell sweat and alcohol. But there was something else, too. A faint perfume. A sweet one. The kind a child would pick. I examined the large skull next to her name, and it expanded. She had over 200 player killer skulls. She'd also killed 20 hunters. Countless bosses. She'd killed her own game guide. There was so much about her story I didn't know.

"I don't have any player killer skulls," I said to her. "I was really, really hoping I'd never get one, but that's the thing with scars. We rarely get to choose them."

I pulled the Ring of Divine Suffering from my inventory, and I put it on my finger.

The girl in the body of a woman just looked at me, panting angrily like a caged dog.

"I still don't understand what's going on with you. Florin thinks it's important to keep you alive because there's something going on in that head of yours, and he thinks a bunch of kids are trapped in there. Maybe there are. I don't know. I don't understand, and I don't know if I ever will. There are so many things happening at once, and I am so afraid of making the wrong decision that it's just overwhelming. The conscription only lasts until the end of this floor, and if we all somehow survive, you'll just be back to the way you were before. You keep trying to kill those I love, and I can't let that happen. So I wanted to say I'm sorry for what I'm about to do. I'm sorry we never got the chance to figure out how to save those inside of you. I don't have a choice."

"Sir," she said. Her eyes had changed. Her voice had taken on a raspy quality. "My name is Diah. Lucia is with Alexandro. And Alexandro is only here when the dogs are close. My name is Diah. We are in the dark. You need to wait until the dog is close, and Lucia will be back. Wait until she is back. Please, sir. Please."

I paused, canceling out the mark I'd just started to form. I needed to get more information first.

"I'm ordering you to tell me if that's the truth."

"I... I. Yes. Sir. Please. We are in the dark, and it's so cold. Sometimes we can hear them talk. We can hear them whispering. It's like there's a river running through our room, and if we touch it, it hurts. They say such sad things. When the dog wanders off, Lucia fades, and one of us takes over, and we can see again. We take turns. Sometimes it's day, and we can see the light."

Holy shit, I thought. I was about to ask a follow-up question when a new message hit.

You are in the presence of another deity. You are now in range of Yarilo. The Scavenger's Daughter fills with new power.

Temporary Effect from Yarilo:

Please wait.

Oh shit, we hadn't fixed that one. Uh, that's not exactly fair for either of you. A bit anticlimactic. Let me fix it real fast.

Please wait.

Temporary Effect from Yarilo:

Protection from all venereal diseases.

"Mongo! No, Mongo get back here this instant!" came Donut's amplified voice.

Donut: CARL, CARL MONGO WENT DOWN WITH THE CLOCKWORKS! I'M GOING DOWN THE CHUTE AFTER HIM!

Donut: IT WON'T LET ME LEAVE THE ROOM!

"Mongo! Mongo!"

I cursed.

Carl: He'll be okay. I'm coming.

Donut: THEY'RE ALL SLIDING DOWN!

I jumped to my feet. "Stay. I want you to remove every stable magical item and artifact and pile it on the floor and wait here."

"I don't know what that means. I don't know how to play."

I paused, surprised. *Goddamnit*. The very fact she wasn't immediately complying suggested she really didn't know what that meant. And if she didn't know...

I turned back to the ramp to rush back up. Slam! I was bowled over once again as the group, larger this time, smashed into me. But this time I

went right through the open front door of the tower, tumbling outside into the burning night air.

It was me, Gustavo 3 the rottweiler, Raul the crab, and three Mongos, one of whom was missing a leg, trailing clockwork parts. We all hit the ground outside and rolled. All of us struggled to our feet.

Raul's health was almost gone. I'd missed what had happened, but his entire shell sizzled. It looked as if he'd already been hit with multiple lightning attacks during the slide down the chute. The one-legged clockwork Mongo staggered and fell, tumbling away. It screeched in indignation, unable to properly stand.

Gustavo barked and fired yet another lightning bolt out of his mouth, and a second Mongo exploded, this one also a clockwork. That left me, the already injured Raul, the one-legged Mongo, and the real Mongo.

We all stumbled anew as a god—Harpocrates—stepped past us, ignoring us all. His giant foot flattened an entire city block. He caught the edge of the one-legged Mongo, who exploded into parts. The god opened his mouth, as if to scream, but no sound came out. He had the ball in his hands, holding it by the shaft of Meatus, and he swung it like a flail at the god Yarilo, who went flying the moment the ball hit him with a wet *smack*.

Harpocrates had **Under Orders** over his head, and he was rank **Legionnaire in the White Dragons**. He was under the direct control of Li Na, who was having him fight the god of lust, who was a member of the War Mage team. He, too, had **Under Orders**. Meatus was still a free agent, and it was unclear if the chaos goddess Eris, who remained completely encased in the ball, had managed to get recruited by the war mages or not.

I looked up, momentarily horrified at the spectacle. I was expecting the ball to break apart, but it was glowing anew with some sort of protection spell, likely also cast by the god. The god briefly paused, jabbed his free finger at the top of the tower in Donut's direction and then moved to continue his fight against Yarilo.

Donut ignored the god and was shouting down at us, shouting for Mongo.

Donut: CARL, I CAN'T EVEN LEAN OUT THE TOWER TO FIRE AT THIS ANGLE. YOU'RE TOO CLOSE TO THE BASE! I CAN'T SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING! WHEN IS THIS GOING TO RUN OUT?

The real Mongo was the first to get up. He shrieked as he jumped upon the struggling dog, snapping his mouth around the dog's backside. Raul, at the same moment, moved to snap off the dog's head with his claw.

"Die, demon, die!" Raul shouted.

Shing!

Mongo screamed in pain as dozens of steel quills erupted from the body of the dog, impaling him. He reflexively jerked away, but Gustavo was now attached to Mongo by the quills. When Mongo jerked away, he pulled Gustavo out of Raul's reach. The quills were from a spell I'd seen before, something called *Porcupine Defense*. The quills pushed in all directions, including up and through Mongo's mouth, exploding through his tough scales from the inside out, showering blood. Gustavo, still stuck in Mongo's mouth, fired lightning again as Raul lunged. He struck Raul right in the center of his chest, and the already injured crab went flying. He disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Mongo!" I cried as I jumped to punch the dog. But I knew my mistake just as I'd lunged. I'd moved too far to the left, no longer keeping the edge of the Nest between myself and the gale tower.

Oof! I went flying as I was hit by the ball of air. I spun and landed, tumbling into the indentation caused by the god's foot.

Pain flashed. My shoulder was in the middle of my chest. I'd been folded in half. I cried in agony as I rolled away, still in sight of the tower.

"Mongo," I croaked, trying to get up and scramble away at the same time as I hit a *Fine Healing* potion. Mongo screamed in outraged pain as he struggled to free himself from the dog impaled inside his mouth.

Zaaapp. Mongo squealed again, health rocketing down. This was a secondary attack that appeared to electrify the dog's quills. And faster than I thought possible, the dog whipped in a circle, the quills just gone, and he lunged at the now-unconscious Mongo's neck. Growling, he caught the neck of the limp dinosaur and began to shake.

No, I thought as I struggled to my feet. *No. Not Mongo.*

Wham! I was hit by another gale blast, but I did not fall. I had my sleep wand in my hotlist and suddenly in my hand, and I aimed, but the wand

exploded in my hand as yet another gale blast hit my arm, bending it backward, shattering bones.

She's never going to forgive me, I thought. This is what will break her.

A terrible, deep giggling filled the night.

The dark, round silhouette appeared above the ridge. Rend.

He'd gotten bigger. Much bigger.

The dog and the dinosaur stood directly between Rend and myself.

"Wrecking Ball!" I wheezed as I cast *Hi-Yo Silver* a second time. Another gale hit me, and I spun head over heels landing on my stomach.

I watched, as if in slow motion, as Rend started rolling toward me. And as he was magically pulled in my direction, he activated the only skill he had. *Wrecking Ball*. The special attack increased his mass and speed, and it did exactly what the name implied.

The back half of Gustavo 3, the second of Lucia Mar's two rottweilers, terror of the dungeon, exploded in a red mist as Rend rushed right up to me, stopping inches from my face.

"Good boy," I gasped at Rend. I downed a healing potion.

Wap! Rend grunted as the tower's bolt slammed right into him.

He barely moved, but he did giggle.

"It's okay, it's okay," a voice said as I desperately healed myself. She was talking to Mongo.

It was Lucia. She was on her knees, sobbing. She'd changed to the hag form, and she was pouring a pet healing potion on Mongo, whose life held just the barest sliver of red. His throat had been ripped open, but he wasn't yet dead.

"You did it," Lucia said. "You did it."

But even as I watched, something changed in the girl's posture. She stood to her full height. Another blast from the gale tower—shooting at me—whipped past her, missing her head by inches, and she didn't flinch. It smacked into Rend, who giggled.

"You should've killed us both when there was still a connection," the girl said to me. "Now it's too late. Now the Eulogist has another ally in the

dungeon, and now you can't kill me. Not unless you want all the children of Earth to die." She shook her head and walked off.

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<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER CARL, 25TH EDITION>

There's a dictionary sitting here in the main room of the guildhall. It's a large, old book. It's from the 1800's, which is a long time ago. Florin, of all people, had it in his inventory. There's a bullet hole right in the center of the book that goes almost all the way through. I keep meaning to ask him about it, but, like with everything, there just doesn't seem to be enough time.

I just used the book to look up the official definition of "Atrocity."

"An act of fiendish cruelty."

It doesn't seem fair, that definition. Or, perhaps, the definition is correct, but the system calling Donut's War Crime spell an "Atrocity" is wrong. Or maybe it's not wrong, but the true act of fiendish cruelty was giving her that spell in the first place. It came in the Legendary 1914 box, the box we'd received after killing D'Nadia. The same box I'd gotten the Run, Little Günter, Run spell in.

The sheer difference in capacity between those two spells is astonishing.

I am always afraid our plans won't go as planned. Oftentimes they don't. But never before have I prayed for a plan of my own creation to not be successful, despite us desperately needing it to work.

If she doesn't cast this spell, we likely won't survive the coming hours. But if she does cast it, and it works as advertised, what then?

She's strong. She's smart. She's my best friend. She is the only true family I have left.

She says she's ready, willing, and able to do this. But I fear she doesn't yet know what she's gotten herself into.

And me? If I let her do this? What sort of monster am I?

This is war. What have I done? This is war.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I called after Lucia. She didn't answer.

“Mongo! Mongo!” came Donut's voice from above.

Donut: HIS HEALTH ALMOST WENT ALL THE WAY DOWN!

Carl: It's okay. He's okay. Gustavo is dead. Lucia is conscripted. Rend saved him.

The fight between the gods had moved to the other side of Shanty Town. Yarilo screamed as the much-bigger Harpocrates beat him senseless with the ball. Yarilo was a feral god and not immortal on this floor and was about to die.

“Lucia!” I called again. “Get back here!”

She stopped at that. She was still conscripted. She opened her mouth, but then she zapped away. She'd been teleported. Since we still weren't allowed to do it, I knew she'd just gotten yanked by an admin.

“Goddamnit!” I moved to put the Nest between myself and the gale tower, but I hesitated. The Nest was still getting hammered by other towers, and I didn't want to tax the shields more. Instead, I moved in the other direction and jumped into a ditch. Rend plopped down next to me. Mongo was already gone, back in the tower on his way back to Donut.

Carl: Donut, kill that gale tower for me and start working on the towers hitting you. I'm coming up to you the moment the gale tower is dead.

Donut: I'M WORKING ON IT.

Zey: Sorry, Carl. The liaisons are indicating they want to interview Lucia now that the dog is dead. They're indicating she won't be available for at least an hour.

Carl: Holy shit, what is going on with her? What did she mean by that with the kids? And the Eulogist?

I'd first heard the term "Eulogist" as something in conjunction with the nebular religious cult, and then again as Agatha's boss or something. Paulie was a different kind of residual as Agatha, and he clearly hated the... what? Person? Monster? What, or who, was the Eulogist? Fopsy the adjutant for the Dream has also mentioned that name. And now Lucia Mar?

Next to me, Rend was peeking out over the ditch watching the gods fight. It appeared Harpocrates had an additional spell over the ball, keeping it from losing more health. I tried not to think about what it must be like for everybody stuck in it. The god held onto the shaft with two hands and was smashing the ball part down on the cowering god of lust, who was scrambling, trying to get away. The fleeing god was picking up chunks of buildings and tossing it ineffectually at Harpocrates.

Yarilo was the nephew or cousin or half-brother of Emberus. Probably all of those things. I couldn't remember how the family tree worked. I hadn't really gotten a good look at him, but he was humanoid, and he had long, blond hair. I was pretty sure he was some sort of elf-like creature. While huge, he was significantly smaller than Harpocrates. The ball he was getting beaten with was even bigger than him, which made the sight almost comical. Almost.

"Stop!" Yarilo shrieked as Harpocrates hammered into him. "Not my face. Anything but my face!"

The shaft was more... rigid... than it had been before. It basically went from a flail to a mace.

Donut: DO YOU REMEMBER THAT SHAKE WEIGHT THING MISS BEATRICE HAD? THAT'S WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE. IT'S OBSCENE!

Zey: We're trying to figure this Lucia thing out. Listen. We thought we had a good handle on what was going on with her, but we were wrong. We'd assumed her getting inside was a glitch at the very beginning of the crawl. Not an uncommon one. We wanted to correct it and kick her back out, but once she started earning, they.... We gave her a few loot boxes to compensate and keep her safe. And now the AI won't let her leave administratively. It says it's unable to extract her.

Carl: Yeah, but it's like there are people inside her head. She says all the children of Earth are in danger. And what did the dog have to do with it?

Zey: It's complicated, Carl. It's not *all* the children. Just the ones that tried to get into the dungeon. And it's only half of those. All the ones who were in a specific wing. They're on the surface in the kinder facility. At least physically. Like I said, we thought we knew what was happening. It's something that would've been corrected the moment she died or left, but we were wrong.

A chill washed over me.

Carl: So what happens if she dies?

Zey: As of about five minutes ago, we thought the glitch would self-correct and release everyone. That's what's supposed to happen. Now? We don't know for certain. The Eulogist is another name for the AI in the center system. We don't know how it's all connected for certain. But now we think... we think if she goes, they all go.

Carl: How many is it?

Zey: I shouldn't be telling you any of this.

Carl: How many fucking children is it?

Zey: About 120,000. Give or take a few.

Holy shit.

Carl: I almost killed her, Zey. You almost let me kill her.

Zey: We learned something new the moment the dog died. There's so much more, but now is not the time. You need to get back to work. None of this will matter if you don't win. *You* put Lucia in your army. *You* conscripted her.

Carl: You tell the liaisons to keep her in there until you figure out how to save those kids. She's a goddamn dead man's switch. A psychotic one. And she just lost her bodyguard. Don't let her leave. Keep her safe.

Zey: It's out of my control, Carl.

A massive chunk of building, tossed by Yarilo, missed Harpocrates, flew over my head, and crashed into the Nest.

"Hey!" Donut shouted, using her microphone.

Warning: The Nest Tower's Integrity is at 25%.

Donut: THE BLACK TOWER IS DEAD! THE LAVA HELPED!

Carl: On my way!

"Come on, Rend," I called, pulling the pet carrier. He started to giggle in protest, but I zapped him away anyway. I really needed to find him some sort of speed enhancement.

Once he was safely put away, I jumped up, and I ran back toward the tower.

I was momentarily taken aback by the sheer destruction wrought over what used to be Shanty Town. Most of our own towers, which we really never got to use, were trampled. The nest tower along with Li Na's abandoned synergy towers still stood, but both were drawing a lot of fire. All the other buildings were just gone, flattened by the passage of the gods.

From Larracos itself, smoke rose into the air. The black, glowing river of lava continued to slowly lump its way over the edge. As I watched, one of the Larracos towers crumbled away.

"Please!" came the weak shout of Yarilo, followed by a terrible, wet splash as Harpocrates slammed the ball down, shaking the ground.

System Message. A deity has fallen. And while Yarilo was damned to the Nothing, his death has angered the gods. The heavens tremble with rage.

The Scavenger's Daughter has looked away, though her eyes remain open. The benefit from Yarilo fades.

I moved back into the entrance of the Nest as I barely registered the messages. Donut had switched off the Donkey Kong stair trap, and the ramp had turned back to regular steps. I rushed upward, using my speed skill to circle up as quickly as I could. The curving stairwell was soaked in blood and stank with the familiar scent of lightning strikes. My feet echoed as I ran.

I didn't have a true reason to get to Donut at this point. We had a new plan, and by going up the tower, I was wasting time. The fight was below, not up.

But I had an overwhelming urge to get to her. We'd been separated for much too long, and it just wasn't the same without her by my side. If this was where this was going to end, I couldn't bear the thought of not having her with me.

As I ran, messages came in. Li Na was back in the chat, organizing with Juice Box via Britney. Li Na was literally riding Harpocrates like he was a mount, who in turn still held onto the ball. The god was clearly enraged by this, but so far the conscription held. Juice Box offered some changelings to assist Li Na, and she had allowed them to also climb onto the god. We were about to move in on the war mages holding the castle, but first we had to

take out a few synergy towers that had war mages in them. I said we'd engage once we stabilized the Nest tower.

Samantha was also in the chat, sobbing about the death of Yarilo. She'd managed to locate Louis, but he was in some sort of secured jail cell, and she was waiting for the patrol to move away before she attempted to rescue him. By now it was clear that Warlord Fang was not in the Reaver castle, and that it was abandoned except for their "security" system, which was a bunch of robots.

The gravity-magic dragon that had crashed *Party Planner* remained circling above the Reaver castle, seemingly content to ignore everything happening on the ground.

If Fang wasn't in his castle, then it was possible he, too, was in the ball along with Epitome Tagg. There was a way to find out, which I would do the moment I got to the top of the tower.

Another strange, bewildering message appeared as I was running up the stairs.

Warlord Message: Warlord Agatha of the War Mage Rebellion has been deemed to have abandoned her post. As such, she has been removed as Warlord from the War Mage Rebellion. Warlord Akuma has been given full system access and named sole Warlord.

This was followed by a note from Victory.

Baroness Victory: Don't even ask because I have no idea what that was.

Donut was at work sniping the towers of Larracos, but it was slow going. Despite Lucia Mar's insistence that the net holding her in place would soon run out, Donut remained trapped. The tower's integrity was down to 16% and slowly lowering. With all the mages either dead or in the ball, we had no way to repair it.

I finally rushed into the uppermost level to see Donut atop her seat, dressed in her ghillie suit leaning against the parapet, her face pressed against the invisible shield like it was glass. The camouflage suit was a strange contrast to her tiara which glowed like a lighthouse beacon.

Even though Donut had no weapon, the first thing I thought when I saw her was *sniper. She looks like a sniper.*

Victory was also here, standing in the corner, silently observing.

Mongo stood beside Donut bouncing up and down. He was missing some feathers around his neck where he'd been injured by Gustavo. And

even though he'd been healed, he remained blood-soaked around his collar. It dripped on the floor in congealing lumps. I knew some of that was Gustavos, but it still hurt me to see it.

Blood was so much more red when it was spilled from someone you loved.

Mongo screeched at my appearance.

Donut muttered, mostly whispering. Her voice had taken on a serious tone I'd never heard before. "Mongo, shush. Mommy is killing bad guys. Move, Bianca. Get out of the way. Aiming, aiming, aiming... Gottcha."

Crack!

Her fiery magic missile rocketed off, and a distant tower deep in Larracos sparked. This was followed by a secondary explosion, and the tower crumbled away.

"Not so tough with your head blown off, are you?" she growled.

Donut: I hit the war mage atop that death ray synergy tower. Moving to the next.

"You're supposed to be focusing on the towers shooting at the Nest," I said. I unleashed Rend back into the room, and he let out a giggle. He moved to Mongo and giggled again as he started to lick the gore on the dino's neck.

Only then did Donut look up, and I could see her face. I tried not to react. I could see the hollowness to her eyes, as if they were trying to focus on something so far away, she couldn't quite see it. It'd only been a few hours, but the change was stark. Hours of sitting up on high and raining death had taken a physical toll.

She'd been level 65 when she'd gone up into this tower. She was now level 74.

We gain things, and we lose them.

I held out my arms.

There was a pause, one that took just a heartbreaking second. But she blinked, her eyes focused on me, and relief filled me.

She let out a meow and jumped from her seat into my arms. She twisted, doing a barrel roll a few times in my grip, and then moved to my shoulders, circling around my neck, just like she used to do when I'd come home from work. She pressed her head against mine, purring loudly.

"My *Magic Missile* is level 15 now," she said. "It tripled in power!"

"That's good, Donut."

She eyed Rend there, who'd moved to Victory's side and was attempting to gnaw on her belt.

She jumped from my shoulder, to Mongo's back, to the ground next to Rend.

"Thank you, Rend. I still think you're disgusting, but you saved my boy's life, and I will never forget that."

Rend belched loudly in her face.

Warning: The Nest Tower's Integrity is at 10%.

I cursed and moved to the edge of the parapet. I eyeballed the closest tower that was still shooting at us. It was another gale tower, but this one was enhanced with splash damage, which made it less powerful than the one that had been tracking me. The blasts of air were probably twenty feet across, however, and they were drubbing the middle of the nest. The enemy gale tower's health was in the deep red. I pulled one of my last rocket launchers, aimed, and fired. The crystal at the top of the tower shattered.

"That is some impressive shooting," Victory said from the corner, speaking for the first time. I looked up at her, and Fopsy, the tripod adjutant for the Dream, was now in the room as well. I hadn't even heard him teleport in. His presence reminded me that I needed to locate the remaining two warlords, Tagg and Fang.

I turned my attention back outside. Harpocrates just stood there, clutching onto the ball by holding Meatus, who'd lost his rigidity. Harpocrates now stood relatively close, right next to Li Na's synergy tower, but otherwise unmoving. As soon as we got word from Britney that those in the college were ready to make their move against the castle, we'd all jump into action.

I activated my Ring of Divine suffering, seeking out those in the ball.

The ring info populated a massive list of available targets, but when I filtered in enemies, there wasn't anyone. The list was too long to just manually scroll, but I did anyway, and they were all just members of the Princess Posse or Team Retribution or mercenaries from the recently-defeated teams. I didn't see anyone from the Reavers or the Dream.

"Huh," I said, trying to figure out why. Was it because of the fleshers? All the enemies likely were wrapped by fleshers, even though they were invulnerable. Maybe because their health was constantly going down and getting healed? I didn't know. It wouldn't list them at all if their health wasn't 100% Either way, I didn't get the information I needed.

I switched to *Ping*, and that worked. I sorted through the information, and sure enough the warlords were both there. Epitome Tagg and Warlord Fang were both nearby, both in the ball. To my surprise, there were also a handful of Saccathians and orcs still alive, also in the ball. These guys were unaffiliated, which was odd. There were a pair of nagas as well, along with an Operatic blob creature. *What the hell? Where did they come from?*

Did it matter? They were here now. I double checked the Ring of Divine Suffering. All the unaffiliated outworlders were in the ball, but they, too, weren't available to be marked for death. I wasn't crazy enough to actually mark them even if I could as I had no way of guaranteeing what would happen next, but it was curious.

"They're almost here," Donut said. She was back in her chair, and she was aiming at a yellow-orange tower, which was shooting *Magic Missiles* similar to her own. *Crack!*

The distant tower crumbled and fell. The Nest's health was now down to 8%, but with that last tower down, nothing was currently shooting at us.

"Who is almost here?" I asked.

Rosetta suddenly rushed into the room, panting. She wasn't alone. Milk also came up behind her, not winded. Her wrists were loosely bound. We still had to pretend like she was a prisoner.

Rosetta bent over, gasping. "This teleport ban really, really is awful. I would not have come into the dungeon if I had known I'd have to do so much running. We left Dong Quixote at the base, guarding the entrance. He has that slug thing with him. The next time we build a tower this high, we are adding an elevator."

"That's what I said!" Donut exclaimed. As she said this, she stumbled slightly, and her paw reached out over the edge. "Hey! The barrier is gone! Lucia's net is gone!"

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I just got a notification. I missed it because I had them muted while I was sniping."

"Good," I said, relief filling me. One less thing to worry about.

Rosetta stopped and did a double take at Fopsy. "Former prime minister," she said, tilting her head at the Dream adjutant. A grin spread across her face. "Get fucked. But I'm glad you're here to witness this."

When Rosetta bent over, I saw she had a second creature strapped to her. It was Edgar the tortoise, who was attached to her like a backpack.

“Comrade,” Rosetta said, still wheezing as she started to untie the straps, “you are significantly heavier than you appear.”

“At least you have your dignity,” Edgar grumbled as he unceremoniously clattered to the floor. Milk reached down with her bound hands and helped turn him upright.

“Oh my god, hi Edgar!” Donut exclaimed. “I thought you got sucked into the ball! Wait, why are you here?”

Edgar started pulling things from his inventory. It was his tattoo kit.

“What is happening?” I demanded.

“Donut needs a spell she doesn’t have for this last part,” Rosetta said.

“I thought you were bringing me a spellbook,” Donut said, looking at the tattoo implements suspiciously.

“You need it at least level 8 for it to work in conjunction with *War Crime*,” Rosetta said. She pulled out a razor. It was a pink Bic, like something Bea would use to shave her legs. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it quick. Where do you want it?”

“Where do I want what, Rosetta?” Donut demanded.

“SORRY,” ROSETTA SAID. “IT’S GOTTA BE A TATTOO, AND MILK HERE IS going to etch words of power over it to increase the spell’s level.”

Donut scoffed. “Have you all gone crazy? I never agreed to a tattoo! Even if I had taken leave of my senses, we don’t have time! When he gave Signet the tattoo, it took all night!”

“It may not be aesthetically pleasing if I do it quickly, but it will work. Now come here, little one,” Edgar said. He stepped forward. “Hmm. Someone lift her camouflage suit and crupper for me. Yes. Best would be on her right flank, I think. Rosetta, quickly now. Shave her. I need a spot about as big as my foot.”

“You will not be shaving my ass!”

I held up my hand. “I thought we were going with *Wall of Fire* and *Laundry Day*?”

Rosetta looked at me. “This is the best way to quickly separate out the enemies in this situation. The fleshers have mostly wrapped themselves around the enemies already, despite their invulnerability, and *Laundry Day* might remove them and negate the effect, which will cause the fleshers to attack our own soldiers. We can’t risk it. Not with Eris and Meatus mixed in there. Our comrades and allies won’t have time to get to safety. This is an entirely different plan altogether. We will need the fleshers still attached to them as the finisher.”

“What’s the spell?” I asked.

Donut continued to rant at Edgar. “Do I look like someone who doesn’t love their mother?”

Rosetta smiled, which was rare for her. “We were going to go with *Hamzo*, but even with the Synergy tower’s effect tied in with the bonus from the *War Crime* spell, it won’t be a wide enough area. So we went with a *Dinner Bell* variant from a cleric who fell defending the FUPA. It’s a spell that came from him worshiping his deity, but it appears it’s going to work. Edgar extracted it properly, and with some ink tips from Milk, we don’t need the toraline anymore to do what we need.” She eyed Donut nervously. “It used to be called *Heel*, but apparently the translation makes it sound like another spell, so this season it’s called *Bijanbi*.”

Hamzo was a spell that stunned and then summoned an enemy to your location. Katia had it. *Dinner Bell* was similar, but it worked in a wide range over multiple enemies at once, and you could designate a location. It didn’t stun them. I didn’t know, exactly, what *Bijanbi* did, but it was clearly something that dragged enemies toward you.

“And we’re keeping the second spell? *Wall of Fire*?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Rosetta said. “With them both amplified by *War Crime*, it should separate the enemies all out and drop them into a ring of fire. Fleshers are fire resistant, but symbiotes aren’t, so if any enemies resist, they should be pounced upon by the fleshers, turned to symbiotes, and then killed. That’s the finisher since *War Crime* keeps them alive. It’ll kill the enemy and any potential baby war mages. And if any survive that, there won’t be many of them.”

“Oh,” I said, and then upon picturing what was about to happen. “*Oh*. Oh fuck.”

A sense of revulsion washed over me.

I looked at Donut, who’d backed against the wall, hiding her backside. I had a thought. “All we need to do is find and kill both Tagg and Fang, and all their soldiers will drop dead.”

“True,” Rosetta said. “But if we don’t do this, they won’t get separated out in the first place. And Fang especially is difficult to locate. He’s worse than a changeling. This will keep our comrades the safest when we break the ball. If we don’t do this, we will lose hundreds, if not thousands.”

I sighed. She was right.

Donut’s *War Crime* spell was both simple and horrific in both usage and scope. And while the area of effect was relatively low, the synergy tower’s

ability to upgrade Atrocity spells and allow them to be cast over a wide area made *War Crime* a true spell of mass destruction.

I had the extra-long description of the spell in my scratch pad. When I had first read it, the AI had been especially enthusiastic, which immediately set off my alarm bells. The more I thought about the spell and its implications—both direct and implied—I'd been overwhelmed with a sense of horror. Horror at how using this spell might affect Donut, especially if we used it to its full potential.

War Crime.

As this spell is unable to be properly trained, it will start at level 5, and it will increase by 5 each time it is cast.

Type: Atrocity.

Target: A line-of-sight beam extending from caster's eyes that shoots in a narrow cone.

Area of effect: See description.

Cost: 1 mana point.

Duration: See description.

Cooldown: This spell can only be cast once per floor, and it can only be cast on the Scolopendra Levels, meaning levels 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18. It can only be cast a total of 3 times.

This spell has been cast 0 times so far.

At level 5, the casting of *War Crime* requires you to choose two spells in your arsenal. It will then combine these two spells in a creative way. The spells will always do what they're supposed to do, but it may happen in a fun, exciting, and unpredictable manner. Intention matters, and for this spell, we respect that. Just know it's going to be awesome *and* something that most governments would consider unconscionable.

At level 10, you will be able to combine three spells. At level 15, you will combine four.

The chosen spells must be at least level 8. Their strength beyond that will not be taken into consideration. Don't worry. It'll live up to the spell's name.

I'll make sure of that.

Three notes:

One. Once you cast this, your health will be knocked down to 1%.

Two. You will lose access to the two spells for the remainder of the floor, but you will now be able to—optionally—chain those same two

spells together and cast them simultaneously for the price of just one on later floors. All spells added to the mix during further castings of *War Crime* will be able to mix and match with one another, either all or in part.

And finally, Warning. No matter what happens to your targets physically, this spell can't kill anyone directly. No matter what happens to them, they will not die from this spell. They will want to die. They won't. Even if the chosen spells results in them being chopped into pieces, liquified, and spewed across the playing field into multiple puddles, they will not die. You should probably have a finisher on hand if that's your intention. As far as I'm concerned, I think it'll be funnier if you leave them alive. But you do you.

So, what happens when you actually cast this? Let's give an example from the one and only time this spell has ever been used in *Dungeon Crawler World*.

The Operatic warlord who cast this decided to combine two spells on a group of charging soldiers from the mantid team: *Fireball* and *Paralysis*. Not very creative, but it worked. He was parked atop a circle of power at the time, and the spell cast in a wide arc, hitting approximately 200 mercenaries for the mantids at once. There was only one true mantis in the bunch, and she noped out of the game all together by ejecting approximately ten seconds after getting hit.

The victims were paralyzed permanently. They were set on fire permanently. They were each blown off in an arc away from the caster where they didn't stop until they hit something. For some of those poor mercenaries, that was very, very far.

They remained there, paralyzed and on fire and undying for the remainder of the floor. The caster of the spell received an experience point update for every hour or so of their suffering.

Incidentally, the wuss of an AI in charge of that season decided to put the on-fire NPC mercenaries out of their misery once the floor finally collapsed about two weeks later.

Additional fun fact. The Operatic who cast the spell supposedly had to go for an identity reset after the crawl and was re-absorbed. Part of his essence eventually formed into Hortense Leadership Unit. I'd like to think that's why he has a twitch to him. Collective minds should really

have learned by now how to peel off their own... impurities. Otherwise you're just wallowing in used bath water, if you know what I'm saying.

The whole last part of the description didn't appear for anyone other than myself as far as I could tell. But it gave me a terrible, foreboding feeling about the spell. With her synergy tower, Donut could cast it on a large group of soldiers at once. We had all sorts of contingencies planned with several different combos. But, in the end, I agreed with Rosetta's assessment.

I didn't want her to cast it at all, but this *would* work. As Rosetta and Mordecai had both noted when Donut first got the spell, if the AI was clearly excited about something you were planning on doing, the AI would generally let you do it.

Li Na: I think Harpocrates is fighting the Conscription, so we need to do this now. I'm back in my tower, and he's harder to control when I'm not near him. We'll need him to fight Eris when she's free. Is everyone ready?

Britney: We are ready to go.

Donut: WE'RE NOT READY YET. ROSETTA AND EDGAR ARE TRYING TO DEFILE MY ASS.

I put my hand on Donut's back. She was tense, which was causing both Mongo and Rend to get jumpy. "You don't have to do this," I said to Donut. "We can come up with another plan, but we need to think of something quickly."

I met the eyes of the others in the room. Rosetta looked annoyed. Edgar appeared impatient. Milk was looking sadly at Donut.

"She's not doing it," I said. "We can't force her to do something she doesn't want."

Rosetta appeared as if she was about to say something snarky.

Outside, things seemed to settle. Harpocrates stood still, like a statue, still clutched onto the shaft part of the ball, which sat motionless on the ground. In the distance, I could hear the unabated screaming of all within. All of the Larracos towers that could fire at the Nest were destroyed, and all the rest were now silent as our remaining friends were all hidden. The lava continued to slowly pour into the city, but it had been rerouted and was filling the upper levels of the funnel before moving downward. It would reach level 50 soon, and the defenders hiding in the college would have no choice but to move.

We now had about five hours before the War Mage team holding the castle would win Faction Wars.

Li Na: We need to hurry. I've ordered Harpocrates to stand still, but I can sense him fighting it.

"Carl," Donut said, looking up at me. "It's okay... You're right. It'll work. It's just... I hoped none of them would be on the outside."

"What do you mean?"

"The scars."

I closed my eyes. "Donut, if you decide to do this, it won't be a scar. It will be a badge of honor. You know why? Because if this works, you will always have a reminder of the day you helped save everyone. And if it doesn't work out? Well, it's just a tattoo. This is no scar, Donut. Not even close because it was your choice. And, you know what? You can still say no, and we'll find another way. We'll find another way, and nobody is going to fault you for it."

She looked at me, eyes shining. "I'll only do it if you also get a matching one. A matching ass tattoo."

I smiled. "Absolutely. But it'll have to wait a day or two."

The ghillie suit disappeared. The crupper disappeared. She turned, facing her tail to Rosetta. "I suppose it won't be so bad. Miss Beatrice had a few monstrosities on herself as well, and as awful as she was, she was still beautiful."

I laughed, moving back to my feet. "You know, Rosetta, if you shave her right in the center of her back in front of her tail, it will make a bold statement."

"So help me God, Carl. I will not have a tramp stamp on me."

I laughed again, and this time, the laugh was genuine.

Donut looked at Edgar as Rosetta went to work, first with scissors, and then a razor. "Is this going to be like a Signet tattoo? One that moves around and stuff? One I can summon? If so, can I tell it to stay away from my neck? I simply can't abide neck tattoos. And what are you drawing, anyway? Can you make it a flower?" She gasped. "Can you do a baby Mongo?"

"This is a different kind of tattoo," he said. He was already preparing the ink. "That was stabilizing and preserving a memory. This is something new, and I honestly don't know what will happen once it's complete. The ink Carl had from the toraline allows one to borrow spells and skills

temporarily from willing subjects. It allows one to take them permanently from unwilling subjects. With help from Milk, I have learned a few new tricks. This ink is similar to that made with the toraline, but not identical, and I don't know how it'll form. It captures the essence of the fallen crawler in a unique way, and it allows you to learn one of their spells or skills. Rosetta was just telling Milk and myself about that book of Voodoo you have, and I believe you may be able to share skills and spells that way as well, using the same ink. It will be more temporary."

"Temporary?" Donut asked as Rosetta backed away. Donut now had a small, round bald patch on her right flank. "Then why don't we do it that way?"

"No time to experiment. Now hold still," Edgar said, picking up the poker with his mouth.

"Wait, wait, what are you drawing? You didn't say!"

His next words came out a little muffled, but I still heard it.

"A dog."

DONUT DIDN'T EVEN LOOK AT THE TATTOO ON HER ASS. SHE STARED forward with quiet dignity as Mongo screeched with concern. The moment it was done, Edgar stepped back.

The tortoise dropped his tattoo stick. "Did it work?" he asked.

Donut's stoic façade immediately cracked. "*Did it work?*" she exclaimed. "Why are you asking me? You're the one... Hey! I just received two very rude achievements. One called me a traitor and another just gave me something called a stolen catalytic converter as a prize! Carl, I knew this would happen! Quick, somebody cover it up before Mongo gets confused!"

"Donut. Did you get the spell?" I asked.

"I did, but it's only level two! My word... this is quite a good spell. It says it came from a god called 'Wepwawet.' What kind of name is that? It gives me the option to worship him now." She gasped. "Carl, Carl, it says he's in the 'Court of Nekhebit!' and I can worship Odette now, too!"

"Huh," I said.

"Now, cover it up. I don't even want to look at it. We'll get it lasered off on the next floor."

"Not quite yet, child. We must get it temporarily above level eight. This may sting a little," Milk said. She came forward and produced a pen, dripping with black ink. Her hands were no longer bound. She wrote some words atop the tattoo with a flourish as Donut hissed with pain. I didn't

recognize the script, but when I examined the characters, the system simply said, **Words of Power**.

“What is that?” I asked. The letters started to glow with blue light, and they completely obscured the tattoo itself.

Milk dipped the pen into her shirt and pulled it back out. It now dripped with purple ink. “It’s a magic style that I haven’t seen used often in the dungeon. The calligraphy guild teaches it.” She wrote more letters. “There, child. Apologies for hurting you.”

The overlapping letters also started to glow, and the tattoo underneath vibrated. The letters seemed to move below the tattoo, which allowed me to see the shape on her mottled skin. It was a simple, rather adorable line art tattoo of a dog. As I watched, the tattoo did, indeed, move. It lifted its leg and started to lick itself.

“Hmm,” Edgar said, peering at it. “That’s quite interesting. I do not believe the art is sentient, as it hasn’t been imbued with anything other than the spell itself. I imagine this is all it can do.”

Mongo let out a growl. The tattoo dog remained in that position, its leg up in the air, licking.

Donut, who was deliberately ignoring all this, gasped. “The spell went up to level 15!”

“It’s temporary, child,” Milk said. She put a hand on Donut’s side in a warm, affectionate gesture. “As the ink fades, the power will decrease, but if you practice using the spell at that high of a level, it will assist greatly with training.”

Warlord Carl: We are ready. Li Na, send Harpocrates in.

To Milk, I said, “I hadn’t realized there were so many different magic systems.”

She smiled sadly. “There’s more than you can imagine. Even with just ink and calligraphy and maps, there are dozens of different methods. It is dangerous, though, attempting to learn too much. There’s a lot the right kind of ink can do. But, over the turns, I’ve learned the danger of using recipes I don’t quite understand. Inks and letters that shine the brightest burn out the fastest.”

She put her warm, webbed hand on my own cheek, surprising me. She met my eyes and continued. “I had a book once, and I wrote several of my recipes in it. But later, I switched to a different type of ink. It was an attempt to share my knowledge with a wider group, and it wasn’t until

recently did I learn all that I wrote after I changed methods faded and disappeared.” The strange, bat and frog hybrid creature lowered her hand. “Some of my best recipes were lost, and it wasn’t until they were needed the most did I learn they were gone. It is my fault that I didn’t write them properly.”

Next to her, Rosetta grunted indignantly.

“But,” Milk added. She pulled what looked like a wineskin from her inventory and handed it to me. “Sometimes it takes a failure or two to learn how to properly prepare a meal. My people, we have a saying. ‘No single recipe is a feast in itself.’ Meaning there’s always another way.”

Donut: CARL, WHAT THE HECK IS SHE TALKING ABOUT? IS SHE HITTING ON YOU?

I honestly wasn’t sure, either, exactly what she was saying, but it clearly had something to do with the cookbook. I examined the wineskin.

Stayfast Ink, 825 ml.

Enough ink for several chonky books.

Warning: this shit stains, so be careful. Nothing will ever make it fade. Nothing. Not even distance or time or the death of a star.

Huh, I thought.

She handed me something else. A fountain pen.

Adept’s fountain pen.

The most basic of all the calligrapher’s implements. How much grief, how much suffering has been caused by one of these things? Yet, how much joy? That whole saying, the pen is mightier than the sword, is one of the few human world metaphors that I believe to be universally true, especially since swords are terrible, barbaric weapons.

This is the most versatile item anyone can own. What will *you* do with it? Write a book that changes everything? Come up with a new, titillating take on huco fiction? (Don’t look that up.) Or will you literally stab someone in the neck with it again?

It’s really up to you.

“Carl has a recipe book,” Donut said from her position on the chair. “It has goblin and chicken recipes in it.”

“I heard,” Milk said, smiling. She met my eyes again. “He also has another book. One that all of you have. *The Book of Voodoo*, I believe it is called. Anything he writes in it will be given to everybody who already has the book. Best of luck to you.”

With that, Rosetta grunted as she picked Edgar back up. She glowed as she took a *Feather Fall* potion. She and the tortoise jumped right out of the tower, angling toward the remains of Shanty Town. Milk gave me a quick smile, and she too, jumped, her wings spreading out, causing her to glide away.

This left me, Donut, Rend, Mongo, and the two adjutants alone at the top of the tower. I looked over the edge, watching them disappear. Far below, I could see Dong Quixote at the base of the tower, still astride Gonk. He had a crowd around him. Sluggalos. I had no idea where they'd come from.

Carl: Dong, you guys need to move away from the tower. It's about to get really hot down there.

Dong didn't answer, but I watched him shout a few orders. Soon, the mass moved away, moving toward where Rosetta and Edgar had landed.

I moved my attention back to the funnel.

I hoped Jamal and Britney and all the others were ready for what happened next. They remained in the college and were about to take part in the raid of the castle of Larracos. The castle was still underwater, but if Juice Box's people pulled through, that was going to change really, really fast.

Donut's job was to use her *War Crime* spell to finish off the remaining members of the Reaver and the Dream army. Li Na was in her tower and would clean up any who survived. She would also direct Harpocrates to occupy the goddess Eris, who was likely under control of the War Mages.

"Come on, Rend," I said, pulling out my pet carrier. "Donut and I are going to jump out of the tower in a minute, and I don't think even you can survive that without a potion. I'll put you out again when we land."

"You too, Mongo," Donut said.

Both pets squealed in protest, but they both allowed themselves to be pulled away.

I put my hand on Donut. "I'm here."

Across the way, a pair of ethereal chains appeared outside of Li Na's towers and started whipping back and forth like tentacles. She was preparing her spells. It was all going to kick off at any moment.

"She said it was my fault that Li Jun is dead," Donut said, looking down at Li Na's tower.

A flash of anger filled me. I took a breath. "She shouldn't have said that. He made his own choices."

"He did," Donut replied. "But she's not wrong, either. I've made a lot of mistakes already today. She will be okay. He was her brother. She's taking it much better than I would if I thought someone else was responsible for hurting you or Mongo."

I didn't answer. I continued to rub her back.

"Carl," she said. "I know you're worried about me casting this spell. It's okay. I'm ready. It's the least of my concerns right now."

"The moment you cast it, your health will go down to 1%. I will have a scroll ready to heal you. Your Cockroach ability shouldn't trigger, but if it does, you probably won't be able to use it again for the rest of this fight. You'll be vulnerable if the tower collapses before we jump. You have Mordecai's Special Brew in your hotlist, right?"

She nodded, still looking at Li Na's tower. "I also have *Hover*, Carl. If the tower falls, I won't. But in case I do, I have the potion."

"Oh yeah," I said. "I forgot about that."

"You keep forgetting how strong I am now. My Constitution is higher than yours. You're overprotective of me. You're almost as bad as I am with Mongo."

I chuckled. "At least we're both aware."

We sat in silence for a moment. Across the way, Harpocrates finally started to stir.

"Lucia killed Bomo. Sledgie is going to be so sad. They're best friends."

"He's not really dead. Sledge will know that."

"No, I suppose you're right. But Li Jun is. Do you think Zhang is going to blame me like his sister does?"

"No," I said. "He's going to be upset, but he's going to blame himself for not being there."

"That's my fault, too."

"That's on that dead alien who was driving Eris. You saved them by casting the *Battle Formation* spell. If you hadn't done it, half of everyone would be dead by now."

"They're all screaming, Carl. Can't you hear them? Nobody has said anything about it, but it's awful. I hope they don't remember their time in

there. I hope they're not all mad at me. If something goes wrong, and we lose everybody, it'll be my fault. How can I go on after that?"

"Donut, listen to me. Nothing that has happened today or will happen is your fault. They put us here. This is their war. If the worst happens, then you and I together will go on the best we can, and we won't stop until each and every one of them has paid their debt tenfold."

Donut didn't reply, still looking out the window at Li Na's tower.

"There's something else I should probably tell you now that it's too late to do anything about it," Donut said.

"What?" I asked, suddenly concerned. "What are you talking about?"

"Katia and I have a plan," she said. "I mean, assuming we get through this next part. We worked it out together. But you can't tell Bautista because he's going to be mad. Katia told me not to tell you because she says you'll Carl it up."

"*Carl it up?* What the hell does that mean?"

She looked over at Victory and Fopsy, silently watching us. "I'll have to send it via message though."

Donut: I got a benefactor box when you weren't looking.

The box would've been from the Apothecary. She still didn't have a second sponsor. Before I could respond, it started.

Li Na: Go.

Outside, Harpocrates finally made his move. He took a step, and he tossed the ball over the edge and into the hole of Larracos. The giant ball plummeted away into the funnel.

Britney: The water around the castle has been turned to acid. Will break open the drain in ten seconds.

We didn't expect the powerful War Mages in the water of the castle to be killed by it suddenly turning to acid—basically the same trick we used with the water in the trenches during our first offensive—but it would hopefully take them by surprise.

The final remaining dwarven digger, which had been tasked with stopping the lava, had been reclaimed and had moved back under Larracos where it would punch a hole in the ground to drain the acid. If the machine survived that, it would move to aid the incursion on the castle.

All around, the inactive defensive towers spun back up, firing at the ball the moment it was in range. Now that Harpocrates wasn't holding it, the health bar over the thing immediately started to go back down.

Donut peered over the edge. “My goodness,” she said. “It went pretty far. It’s stuck about $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s of the way down! I hope it’s not touching the acid water!”

Donut hesitantly reached forward and touched the empty air in front of her. Her paw hit a solid wall. “Uh, Carl. The net is still in effect!”

“What?” I said, suddenly filled with alarm. This wasn’t going to work if Donut and I couldn’t jump. “You said it went away!”

“It did! I got a notification and everything! I think this is a different net!” She waved her paw again. “It’s further out than the first one!”

I quickly went forward and stuck my hand over the edge. My hand hit an invisible wall, as if it was made of bricks.

Warning: This structure is contained within a magical field. You are unable to leave.

“What the hell,” I said. “This is a new net. The last one was just on you, and this one is either on both of us or it was cast after Rosetta and Milk left!”

Britney: Draining commencing. As soon as it’s drained, we’ll cast the *Bounce House* spell to catch the falling crawlers.

“I suspect this net is still from before,” Victory said. “This is classic Lucia Mar.”

“I agree,” Fopsy said. “Her first one was from a scroll. A personal net. She likely cast a secondary spell in case Donut had a countermeasure. The notification Donut received before would’ve been from the primary net timing out, which would’ve triggered the second one. It was just waiting for a power source, I think.”

“Rosetta would’ve triggered it when she left!” I said

Victory snapped her fingers. “It’s *Power Siphon*! Those jewels used for the towers leak all sorts of energy. They’re in range. It’s drawing power from the active towers in Larracos.”

“Quite clever,” Fopsy said.

“It’s more than clever,” Victory agreed. “It’s genius. I would never have thought of that. It’ll go away when the other towers stop shooting or when she turns it off.”

I just looked at the two adjutants. “Are you serious? So it’s not going to go away until Lucia gets back? She’s in our army now. I already ordered her to turn it all off! This is bullshit!”

I pulled up the warlord menu, moved to Lucia, and it gave an error.
Combatant is off the playing field.

Victory shook her head. "I'm sorry, Carl. She did turn off all her active spells. This one activated after she left. You should know how Lucia works by now. She leaves dozens of magical triggers everywhere she goes. I was wondering how she powered all of them, but this makes sense. I should've known she has a *Power Siphon* ability. Donut, make sure you never cast your *Sentry* spell if you have to fight her again."

Donut had her sunglasses back on. "You're right! I can see the power flowing from the towers! It's flowing to a spot on the ground down there! I knew this mode on the glasses wasn't useless! Wow, I should've used this instead of the heat mode when I was looking for the generator!"

"What spot? Where! Quick, shoot a *Magic Missile* at it!"

The Nest remained at 8% health, but if the casting of *War Crime* went as expected, the whole area around the tower would soon be on fire. And if Donut was stuck in here when it went down, that was going to be a problem. The plan was to cast and then jump. The net would deactivate if the tower broke, but would it break in time for her to use her *Hover* to save herself? Would I be able to heal her in time?

And what about myself? What the hell would I do? I'd go down with the tower into a *Wall of Fire* filled with fleshers.

Donut shot a missile, and it exploded against the ground. Nothing happened.

I cursed. This was a sort of magical trap, a kind I didn't specialize in. Unlike my style, these formed little, round jewels that didn't appear until they activated. Ranged weapons and spells weren't going to work against it. Someone needed to physically pick it up and put it in their inventory.

Carl: We need to abort. Donut can't yet leave the tower!

Li Na: It's a little late for that. The ball is about to break.

Shit, shit, shit. "Donut, don't cast *War Crime*!"

Down below, the ball's health rocketed downward into the red. She needed to cast immediately after it broke, or everyone would be mixed in together, including the gods. And if the NPCs were going to storm the castle at the same moment, they, too, would all be mixed in. If the War Mages had control of Eris, she could possibly one-shot us all, all at once.

"What?" Donut said, panicked. "If I don't cast it, then all of this will be for nothing! I have to!"

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Cast it, but don’t pick fire! Pick something else! We need the Nest to stay intact!”

“What? What should I pick!?”

“Anything but fire!”

Carl: Dong. Look where Donut fired her missile. Go back there and take the magical trigger into your inventory. It’s about the size of a marble. It’ll burn when you pick it up. Hurry! Fast!

Dong: Uh, isn’t that area all about to be on fire and filled with fleshers?

Carl: No! Go!

Li Na: The ball has broken! Cast now!

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“CASTING NOW!” DONUT SHOUTED.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed a third Atrocity.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has received a new class.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut will now be referred to as The Oak Fell.

System Message: The Oak Fell has been named Champion of Nekhebit.

Before any of that could even register, more notifications rolled in.

The Scavenger’s Daughter has opened her eyes. You are in range of two more deities.

You are now within range of the feral god Meatus.

Temporary effect from Meatus:

Your dick will fall off if you get an erection.

“What the fuck?” I exclaimed.

The moment I exclaimed it, the world froze, but the notifications continued to come.

You are in range of Eris.

Random Effect! As Eris is the goddess of chaos, this effect will change each time you are in her presence.

Temporary effect from Eris:

One current god effect will be permanent!

“Oh, shit!” was all I could say.

A spinner appeared floating in front of me. It only had two items on it: **Dick will fall off!** And **Level-15 Pied Piper!** I hadn’t even looked up the *Pied Piper* skill, which is what I got from Harpocrates. The center of the spinner was a wide, laughing mouth with red lips. The lips were tattooed with a spiral pattern, which I knew was a sign of the chaos goddess. The thing started to spin, like the Wheel of Fortune game.

“No, no, no!” I cried as it started to whirl. “What the fuck? What the fuck!”

It stopped on **Dick will fall off!** hovered for a second, then ticked over to **Level-15 Pied Piper!**

Your benefit from Harpocrates is permanent!

I almost fell over with relief.

The world remained frozen, and I suddenly had a hand on my shoulder.

I could still move, and I whirled.

It was Eris, goddess of chaos, re-sized to about my height, standing right next to me. She was *not* under control of the War Mages. Tall, elf-like with a strangely long neck. Upon closer examination, I saw she wasn’t fully elf. She had a few serpentine features, making her appear like she had a distant relative who was a naga. She had long, smooth blonde hair. She wore armor underneath a flowing, black and white striped jacket that went all the way to the ground. The glowing, Valkyrie armor underneath was covered with swirl patterns, but in the center of her chest was her symbol. Two back to back C shapes with a flaming lance through it. Her large, over-inflated lips were covered with a spiral tattoo.

The deity shook her head and laughed. Her tongue was forked. “By the All Tree was that exhilarating. I haven’t had that much fun since the initial purge. And now I’m free. Oh, this is going to be delicious.”

“What... What is happening?” I asked as her description popped up.

Goddess of Chaos Eris. Level 250.

This deity has lost her sponsor and can no longer be sponsored this season.

This deity is invulnerable on this floor.

This deity has been summoned by battlefield conditions. Summoning rules apply.

Eris. Goddess of Chaos. Half-sister of Taranis, mother to nobody, lover of parties, drinking, chaos—of course, and generally known as

the Ascendency's worst, most unapologetic gossip. If she were mortal and human, she'd be called a wine aunt. She'd have a rich, dead husband who died under mysterious circumstances. She would split her time between the hair salon and spending her days on the local community Facebook page where she would be constantly creating utter pandemonium with her posts and her "this is just my opinion, but..." style messages.

All of her nieces and nephews love her. In fact, everybody loves her, even though they all know deep down she's an utter piece of shit. People can get away with that sort of thing when they're attractive and throw great parties.

There hasn't been a single season of Faction Wars since the beginning where she wasn't sponsored by someone. As such, this is a pretty unique situation right now where her true personality, her true purpose can finally shine through.

One of her abilities is being All Knowing. She knows everybody's business, which makes her a dangerous foe and an even more dangerous friend. If she gives you information, it's probably true, and it's probably something that's going to get you into trouble for knowing. While she's able to lie, she rarely does. Why bother when the truth is often so much worse?

Eris is a prime contender for the Ascendent Throne.

Eris reached forward and gently bit my ear. "Don't die, Carl," she purred, her voice seductive. She still sounded oddly like Hekla, but not nearly as much now that her pilot was dead. "I know you worship grumpy ol' Emberus, but we'll change that soon, especially now he has put you in an impossible situation. See how Donut was just named Champion? I can do that to you as well. You'll have to kill all three, of course. Taranis, Emberus, and Hellik. But don't worry. I'll help."

"Uh," I said as she rubbed a hand across my shirt.

"No, no, no," she said, giggling, pointing downward at my boxers. "That nasty curse from Meatus is still in effect, even if it's not permanent. None of that. Here. Let me help you."

She reached over and snapped my pinkie. I screamed. The goddess shrieked in laughter.

"Oh, I wish you weren't already married." She kissed me full on the lips. She pulled back and gave me a look. "The War Mages traded the Gate

of the Feral Gods with a merchant named Paca at the Midnight Market. Paca is an agent for Krakaren Prime, who is stuck in the Nothing. Paca has the gate in her stomach. Get the gate back and give it to that insane Skyfowl who built the antennae underneath your castle, and maybe you can actually win this thing. Also, Britney picked that axe off the ground and is now possessed.”

She disappeared with a *crack*.

Eris has left the Realm. The Scavenger’s Daughter looks away.

Already married? I thought as I downed a healing potion. *Axe? What axe? Possessed? By who?*

What the actual fuck just happened?

All restrictions on teleportation are now lifted.

More messages came, including one from Emberus that minimized just as everything unfroze.

Next to me, Donut had gone completely rigid. Her health started to decrease. It wasn’t an instant thing, but a slow drain. She was unable to move.

She had a new notification over her head. Her title had changed from **Warlord** to **Champion**.

I immediately attempted to apply the healing scroll, but it misfired. I was going to have to wait.

The completely unexpected visit from the goddess had thrown me off kilter. I shook my head, trying to get my mind back on track.

“Oh, *shit*,” I said, looking outside. The ball had indeed broken apart. All I could see was thousands of bodies flying up toward our location, moving as if in slow motion. Mixed in with them was the god Meatus. Eris, of course, was gone. I couldn’t see from this location, but below it all, all of our allies were now falling deeper into Larracos. Just below where the ball had stopped should be a wide-area spell called *Bounce House* that was going to catch them all, giving them a moment to recover while they received instructions.

At the same moment, the NPCs and our remaining troops would be storming the castle, which was now drained of acid.

The remaining defensive towers would be firing, and there wasn’t much we could do about it, but the moment anyone set foot in the throne room, all the towers would go inert.

Harpocrates remained on the edge of the hole, unmoving, eyeing the form of Meatus that was flying upward.

I couldn't tell what the second spell Donut picked was. As for right now, all the enemies were frozen, moving inexorably upward as they were pulled in our direction as the towers fired mercilessly at them.

"Donut," I called, my voice hoarse. "What was the second spell?"

She didn't answer. She was still frozen, her health still lowering.

Then I saw it, hovering above the hole of Larracos, right outside the tower. It was the massive, glowing outline of a cat's paw. The paw was absolutely enormous.

Astral Paw. Her two spells were the *Binjabi* spell and *Astral Paw*.

The frozen soldiers, including Meatus, were moving toward us. They came up out of the hole and moved upward, moving to the side of the Nest. They floated upward slowly, like barely-inflated balloons.

The world, once again, froze. Music started to blast across the world on its own. I recognized the song because it was one of Monobrow Sam's favorites.

The song was "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit.

The ethereal cat's claw grew to an enormous size, big enough to catch the thousands of floating soldiers and god.

"Oh *shit*," I muttered.

Carl: Guys. If you're on the ground in Shanty Town, fucking run.

Dong: Listen. Do you want me to get the trap or not?

Carl: Run!

The thousands of soldiers at this point all seemed to wake up. Elves, gnolls, and hundreds of the cyborg Reaver mercenaries. They struggled and started to scream as all floated upward, all bunching up against the bottom of the massive, unmoving cat's paw. Meatus was in the middle of it all, squirming, unable to flee as he too thrashed.

"No," Meatus cried. I could now see he was covered in fleshers, which swarmed over everyone trapped underneath the paw. All the soldiers screamed as they started to get dissolved. Sparks rose as fleshers burned through cybernetic armor. Blood rained.

"No. Daddy, help me!" Meatus cried, his voice louder than the song. "I just wanted to sing!"

"Daddy?" I mumbled.

More messages came in. I was relieved to see it was Katia, Elle, and Imani, all coordinating the assault on the castle below. I pushed it away for the moment as I watched, horrified, as the slow-motion War Crime unfolded above Shanty Town.

Donut coughed. I slammed on the healing scroll, and her health started to rocket up. I put my hand on her as I watched outside. A few soldiers who'd gotten stuck along the way continued to float upwards.

"Did it work," Donut asked, choking out the words. "Carl, I don't feel good. I have a new class. I have a bunch of new spells. What's happening?"

I reached down, and I scooped her up into my arms. "It's okay," I said. "Just close your eyes, okay? It's almost over. I got you."

With the deactivation of the teleport ban, the net was no longer an issue. We had an escape hatch right behind us. It would teleport us all the way to just outside the safe room at Area 52, where we could go in and use the doggie door to go anywhere we wanted.

Across the way, something was happening with Li Na's tower. Dozens of chains had appeared, spreading out in all directions, attaching themselves to the wreckage all around her tower. Several of these chains had attached themselves to the Nest.

I blinked, trying to figure it out. "Li Na," I muttered. "What are you doing?"

"It's the finisher," Donut said from my arms. She was pressed against me, trembling. She rearranged herself, and she stretched her arm out, hovering over empty air. "I shouldn't have picked *Astral Paw*," she said. "I have to do it myself."

Above, the paw remained hovering there in open air, waiting. Waiting for Donut.

Below, Li Na was building a lattice pattern of chains. There were more chains than I thought possible.

Li Na: Donut, this is all I can build. Do it.

"I can feel them, Carl," Donut said. "I can feel them under my paw." She trembled in my arms.

"I'm here," I said.

The paw in the air quivered. Within, the soldiers trapped continued to scream.

She closed her eyes, and she swiped downward with three quick baps. Her movement was mirrored outside.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

The world rocked as the massive, ethereal cat's paw, clutching onto thousands and thousands of enemy soldiers and an enormous god penis slammed into the ground, pushing through the lattice pattern of chains.

The paw moved right through the chains. The enemies trapped in her claw did not.

They did not, until they did.

In my arms, Donut continued to swipe her paw downward.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

The effect was like forcefully slamming a thousand cherry pies into a chain-link fence over and over until almost all of the goo made it through to the other side.

The chains broke one by one. But as they broke, Li Na grew more. With each slam, the survivors who remained stuck to the paw were slammed down again. And again. And each time they pushed through chains, they were cut to pieces.

She did it dozens of times. She did it until the screaming stopped.

The music faded, and it was done.

I gently placed Donut back onto her seat, I moved to the parapet, and I vomited over the side of the tower.

SYSTEM MESSAGE: MEATUS HASN'T EXACTLY LEFT THE REALM. HE'S now slap-chopped all over the realm. Holy shit. Still, the Scavenger's Daughter looks away because even she doesn't want to look at that. Luckily for you, the benefit fades. For the remainder of this floor, your penis is now protected from getting chopped off! Isn't that great?

Rosetta: It's in my teeth. It's in my fucking teeth! Oh gods, I can taste it.

"Noooooooooooooooo!" came a deep scream, shaking the Nest.

Harpocrates. The god wasn't mute after all. He raised his arms in the air. "My cock! My beloved cock! You will pay for this, Champion of Nekhebit!"

And with that, he too, disappeared.

Harpocrates has left the realm.

The Scavenger's Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades, though you now have it permanently, which, I gotta tell you, ain't all that exciting.

I peered out into the night. Gore completely covered everything as far as I could see. Above, the paw dissipated, showering more blood and body parts over Shanty Town. The chains faded away, as if made of smoke.

Blood dripped from everything and everywhere.

At the same moment, it abruptly started to snow. At least I thought it was snow at first, but I realized it was actually ash. Ash from the eruption.

It mixed with all the gore in the air, giving the impression it was literally raining blood. The entire night took on a red tinge. The river of lava seemed to be frozen, having mostly cooled, though in the distance I could see hints that the lava continued to ooze from the mountainous region and now moved off in other directions after having clogged the river.

This is hell, I thought. This is hell.

A notification came regarding a new Demon Eviction, but it was abruptly cut off by a strange notification that I didn't get a chance to read.

"Okay," Donut said as red ash fell over us. "Okay." She sat up in her chair, and she was rapidly rubbing her paw on the side of the parapet as if she was trying to clean it. She still trembled, but I could see she was calming down. My own heart wouldn't stop thrashing.

Donut did not have any additional player killer skulls. That was a relief. The spell was supposed to know who our enemies were. It seemed that part, at least, worked properly.

Below, the city defense towers were firing nonstop, and I knew they were firing at our people, but even as we watched, a fire lance tower tumbled away, followed by a familiar dinosaur roar. Big Tina.

The towers were getting taken out one by one by the sheer mass of folks crowded down there. A group of fairies, led by Elle, whipped through the air, shooting ice over the pools of steaming lava filling the upper levels of Larracos before spiraling back down to start shooting out the crystal of another tower.

"Okay, it's done. It's done," Donut continued. She wasn't talking about the assault on Larracos. She shook her head and blinked. "That... that wasn't pleasant."

"Donut..." I began, but she held up a paw, stopping me. Our views were absolutely spiked, despite the fight having moved below.

She sat upright and took a moment to compose herself. "At least I'm back in my rightful spot as leader of the party. I was worried I'd lost my Former Child Actor benefits, but it says I still have them. This new Oak Fell class and this champion thing are in addition to my original class. I don't even worship Nekhebit, and it says I don't have to if I don't want to, but I'm not allowed to worship anyone else who's not in her 'court.' Both the class and the title come with a bunch of weird spells. Plus, I just got another two Celestial boxes and a pretty amazing Lorena Bobbitt achievement."

Mordecai: By his left fucking tit, Donut. By his left tit. Those spells you just gained are deity spells. You are... I think you're now the most powerful crawler in the history of this game. You'll have a few choices you need to make for both your intelligence and strength now that they're both over 100. The notification probably won't go away until you choose.

Donut: GOODNESS, I'M NOT GOING TO PICK THE SWOLE BENEFIT. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT IT DID TO CARL? CAN YOU IMAGINE? I'M GOING TO PICK MUSCLE MOMMY FOR STRENGTH SO MONGO IS STRONGER, AND FOR INTELLIGENCE I PICK BRAIN TRUST SO I CAN MAKE *MAGIC MISSILE* EVEN MORE POWERFUL. I ALSO HAVE ONE TO PICK FOR MY CHARISMA TOPPING 200. I'M GOING TO PICK ONE CALLED WHOLESALE DISCOUNT.

Mordecai: Uh, are you sure about that Muscle Mommy benefit?

Donut: TOO LATE. I PICKED IT. WOW! HAVE YOU SEEN MY CHARISMA?

Mordecai: Yeah. I think the Bopcas will be worshiping you again. Your charm and Love Vampire skills are stronger than that of most gods.

Donut: PLUS I GET EVERYTHING AT COST AT THE STORE. IT'S FANTASTIC!

"Holy fucking shit, Donut," I said upon examining her. I knew she had to have grown because even I had leveled a few times—up to level 81—despite me not doing anything. Still, I wasn't expecting *that*.

Her level had grown to 135.

I could tell she was struggling, but the fact she was actively covering it was such a relief. That meant something. I hadn't lost her yet. Plus she did seem genuinely excited about some of these new benefits.

She was dealing with this better than I was. We needed to get back out there, but first, we had to rest a minute. Still, my mind reeled at the amount of power she'd gained all at once.

Donut continued. "I was quite worried for a moment that they'd give all the credit to Li Na since she put all those chains out there, but Mordecai is correct. It looks like I am once again the strongest crawler in the dungeon. Mongo is going to be so proud, and with my new Muscle Mommy benefit, his strength is boosted by 25% of my own strength!" She looked over the

edge and clicked her tongue. “Hmm. I think I’m going to keep him caged up for a bit. Carl, best keep Rend caged as well. If they manage to eat some of that, uh, Meatus gore, I don’t think I could look at either the same again. As the strongest crawler in the dungeon I have to maintain a sense of decorum, and both Mongo and Rend by extension must also maintain the same propriety. Goodness, the smell is quite repulsive, isn’t it?”

System message. A crawler has maxed out her base strength. Crawler Li Na now has 300 strength.

System message. A crawler has maxed out her base intelligence. Crawler Li Na now has 300 intelligence.

System message... yeah, I can keep doing this, but she maxed them all. Even Charisma, which is a hard one.

System Message. So, this has never happened before, but a crawler has reached max base stats. She can still raise her stats beyond that with equipment and bonuses and spells, but we don’t actually have a plan to deal with this, so I’m gonna have to come up with something.

I felt a deep, deep chill.

Elle: For chrissakes, guys. We were only out of it for like an hour.

“Hey!” Donut exclaimed. “Carl, her level is only 87! How did she do that? And why didn’t I get one of those announcements for charisma? My charisma is way above 300!”

“Not your base, Donut. Not yet,” I said, looking over at Li Na’s chain tower, which had grown silent. “You crazy asshole. Holy shit, Li Na.”

I couldn’t remember Li Na’s level before this, but she’d clearly leveled several times as well. Just not as much as Donut. Between her, Donut, and Prepotente at level 100, I was getting left behind.

I now knew why I couldn’t mark the thousands of enemies in the ball. There were no simultaneous marks allowed on this floor. I couldn’t mark them because Li Na had already done so.

She’d marked them all.

But, the moment I thought that, I realized there were two notifications we *hadn’t* received.

I looked over, surprised. Both Victory and Fopsy were gone. I hadn’t seen them leave.

“She used the Ring of Divine Suffering,” I said. “But she has a problem. I’m pretty sure she’d marked both Tagg and Fang, but we didn’t kill them. They both got away somehow. More might have gotten away, too.”

“Uh, oh,” Donut said. “Doesn’t that mean she can’t heal?”

“Yes. And every time she uses her chains, she loses just a little health.”

Donut grunted. “That doesn’t matter. She can just punch everyone to death now. And as soon as we win Faction Wars, they’ll all drop dead now because of that new stupid rule. Where is she anyway?”

That was a good question. I activated *Find Crawler*, but before I could even scroll over to her, we received the answer.

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution has been abandoned by the War Mage Rebellion. The City Defense system has gone inert!

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution is now occupied by forces from the Princess Posse. If you can hold for six hours, your team will win Faction Wars!

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution has been abandoned. It has fallen back into control of Team Retribution.

Britney: Um, Carl. Li Na just tore through the castle. She’s glowing, and she’s not talking to anyone. The remaining war mages opened a portal and disappeared. We don’t know where they went.

Carl: Shit. I think she’s looking for Tagg and Fang. She can’t heal until they’re dead.

I moved to a private chat.

Carl: Hey. Li Na. How many got away?

Li Na: Several, including both warlords. There are several unaffiliated outworlders here. Where did they come from?

Carl: I saw them. I don’t know who they are or how they got here. Look. The NPCs still have someone in the Dream castle, and they’ll have the throne room captured in about four hours. Now that things are settled here, we gotta go to the Reaver castle, rescue Louis, and we’ll take their throne room, too. You’ll be okay. As soon as that’s done, we’ll finish the plan. We just gotta watch out for the remaining War Mages. I don’t know where they went.

She didn’t answer.

I moved to the main chat, and Donut was already in there apologizing to everyone about putting them in the ball, but everyone was claiming they didn’t have any memory of it.

Elle: Donut, you saved our asses. When we were in that *Witness* spell but all piled up, it was like we were paralyzed, and we could feel

everything, but we couldn't move. It was awful. The moment you cast that battle formation spell, it was lights out.

Chris: The *Witness* spell was just as bad as being controlled by Maggie. You saved us.

Donut: YOU WERE ALL SCREAMING. ARE YOU SURE?

Katia: We're sure. The worst part was waking up because we were falling and didn't know what was happening, but it was still better than where we were. That was truly horrible.

Donut: AND IT DIDN'T HURT?

Elle: My throat feels like I've been gargling sandpaper. And I smell like that god's schlong. It's worse than when you got sprayed by the skunk. But that's it.

Donut: OH NO, I'M SO SORRY.

Elle: It's not the first time I've woken up stinking like a stranger's wang, believe me.

Imani: Elle!

Elle: Don't pretend you don't know what went down on canasta night. Look, Donut. That was a complete shitshow. We lost people from the towers when we woke up. Some of us got burned by fleshers. Several lost limbs. It wasn't pretty, but you pulled through for all of us in a way nobody else could. Not even Carl. What you did... Nobody is ever going to forget it. You are a goddamn hero.

Donut: LI JUN DIED. BOMO DIED. AND HUNDREDS MORE.

Elle: Yes, they did. And none of them would have it any other way. You know why? Because they died helping you. They died helping you save all of us. Don't you even think twice about it. You rose to the fucking occasion, and there's a reason why you're now... Uh holy shit, Donut. I just saw your level.

Donut: SOMEBODY MAKE SURE ZHANG IS OKAY. HE HASN'T SAID ANYTHING.

Imani: I'm with him right now. He's very upset, but he's proud of his friend.

Zhang: Donut. Jun was always afraid he wouldn't do anything important. He was afraid his sister would be lost without him. You helped her get strong enough to protect herself. That would've made him proud, and it makes me proud to have you as a friend.

Donut: ZHANG, I'M SO SORRY.

Zhang: You have nothing to apologize for. He was my best friend, and I have nothing but admiration and respect for you.

Donut was back in my arms, cuddled against me, her eyes closed.

“It’s okay to cry,” I said.

“Not yet,” she said after a moment. “We’re not done yet.”

“No,” I said. “No, I guess we’re not.”

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WE NOW STOOD BEFORE THE ABSOLUTELY WRECKED CASTLE OF THE Semeru, who'd built it as a capstone against further intrusion toward the gods. The castle was originally made of living wood, and it had since been encased in intricately carved stone inlaid with gemstones. The wood was now gone, having rotted away. The remaining stones barely resembled that they were once any sort of cohesive structure. The roof was long gone. What remained of the cracked and sunken-in walls were covered in marks that looked like scars from electrical strikes. It was where tree roots had grown up along the walls and since rotted away.

The whole area was covered in wet, slimy goo mixed in with ash. The smell was indescribable. It was like burned fish mixed with rotten milk mixed with sulfur mixed with mulch. And even though none of the gore from Donut's *War Crime* spell had made it down here during the initial attack, it still rained red ash, giving everything a dark, ghoulish dusting.

I thought of Priestly, the cookbook author who'd gone insane at the sight of this city after it had fallen. Stab, stab, stab.

Slam, slam, slam.

There was a statue here, once, at the entrance, but it had fallen over and shattered. The stones of the statue were still wet, and as the ash settled on it, it caused the rock to glitter in the light from the multiple *Torch* and *Spotlight* spells hovering over the bottom levels of Larracos. Far to my left, a large section of the second and third levels of the city were just gone,

replaced by a hole. The massive dwarven digger, which was basically a boxy, god-sized robot covered in all directions with spiral digging arms and goblin-murder-dozer-like spinning wheels, sat idle. A pair of Semeru stood atop it, doing something inside a control panel on the shoulder of the thing. They looked like bugs standing upon it.

“Watch out for the puddles, mate,” Florin said. “The bartenders are neutralizing them, but most are still acid.”

I’d just finished telling him everything that had gone down with Lucia. He’d laughed when he heard about the net trap. We were waiting for Imani to finish up in the hospital tent. Once she came out, a group of us were going to head to the Reaver castle to rescue Louis, who remained trapped and unconscious, but otherwise unharmed. Samantha said she couldn’t get to him because the walls kept changing. She was in a constant, rolling fight with a bunch of robot dogs who had control of the castle.

Both here and in Shanty Town, the NPCs, the won-over mercenaries, the veterans, and the crawlers all worked together to help clean up the damage. We were rapidly repairing the towers that we’d destroyed.

There was still no sign of either Tagg or Fang. There was no sign of the War Mages.

I did, however, have a string of messages in my warlord chat. The bewildering conversation confused everything even further:

Warlord Akuma: Hey, underwear boy. Do me a favor. Kill that old lady for me, and I’ll forgive you and your pet for killing off so many of my brothers.

The Champion of Nekhebit: I AM NOT A PET, MR. WAR MAGE. AND WHY ARE YOU MAD AT ELLE? SHE IS DELIGHTFUL. ALSO HOW CAN I CHANGE MY NAME BACK TO WARLORD DONUT? IT DOESN’T DO THIS IN THE REGULAR CHAT.

Warlord Akuma: Is Elle the one on the Four Seasons path? Not her, dipshit. Keep her alive if you wish for us to face Scolopendra and survive. Agatha. The other warlord we were forced to accept in order to gain system access. She was forced upon us, and she is an enemy to you. She is an enemy to us all. We had no hand in those so-called “action items” other than the *Conscription* one. She slipped away before I was able to kill her. Do this for me, and we will be allies.

Warlord Carl: Us? If you wish for “us” to survive?

The Champion of Nekhebit: DID YOU JUST CALL ME A DIPSHIT? I'M A HIGHER LEVEL THAN YOU ARE, YOU SAGGY TWAT.

Warlord Carl: I'll tell you what. Tell me where you are, and I'll be happy to discuss how we can work together in person.

Warlord Akuma: You won't be seeing me again on this floor. We never wished to keep that falling-down castle. We sought to test the potions we gathered. We wished to find the Scavenger's daughter, who was hidden within the castle, and we found her. She is with us now. Once we had her in our possession, we left. That was all we ever wanted with this place, and we are no enemies to you. But Agatha's actions continue to place everybody and everything in jeopardy, and she must be dealt with. She has a method that allows her to jump to the Waiting Room and reappear outside an open stairwell. You won't likely see her on this floor again. You will have to find her on the 10th. Do this for us if you want to survive. She seeks to kill us all. Not just you and not just me. Everybody and everything.

Epitome Tagg: By the gods. That orc princess was right. We should have blown the failsafe weeks ago. By the gods.

The Champion of Nekhebit: HEY, HOW DID YOU CHANGE YOUR NAME?

Warlord Carl: Yeah, we're looking for you, too, buddy.

The Champion of Nekhebit: NO, SERIOUSLY. THIS IS ANNOYING.

Epitome Tagg: For the sake of the gods, it's in the notification menu. Section four.

WARLORD DONUT: IT WORKED! THANKS! WE'RE STILL GOING TO KILL YOU, THOUGH!

The conversation had ended there, but it was followed by another message.

Warlord Message: Warlord Akuma has left the realm. As per the current season's ruleset, the War Mage rebellion has been defeated. They have no assets to award.

I was so confused by the War Mage's words and actions, I'd copied and pasted it and sent it to both Victory and Zev, and neither answered me right away, which worried me even further. When Victory did answer, she didn't even address the question.

Baroness Victory: I don't know where Akuma went. That team is officially defeated and therefore no longer under our authority.

Carl: Mordecai, who is the Scavenger? And who is the Scavenger's Daughter? I know it's the name of my patch, but I didn't know there was more to it than that.

Mordecai: Are you talking about the in-dungeon one or the fairy tale? Either way, that's a conversation that's not going to matter if you don't figure out how to find and kill those two warlords, or if you don't figure out how to survive this floor without having to fight Juice Box and the NPCs.

Carl: That last part is already settled. I hope. I'm more worried about Donut and Katia. We still have to do the flower ceremony, but we can't until everything is fully settled.

Mordecai: I know, son. Focus on that before you focus on anything else.

Florin laughed again, bringing me back to the present. "You're lucky Lucia only cast two nets, mate. She's the queen of the triple tap. Is she still in with the liaisons?"

"She is. Hopefully she stays there."

He nodded. He stretched and leaned his shotgun over his shoulder. "We'll see what personality she settles on when she comes back out. Hopefully they talk her into taking a deal at the beginning of the 10th. If not, I will volunteer to keep her safe."

"You're not planning on taking a deal?" I asked.

Florin scoffed. "I suspect most will take a deal if they're actually offered. They're tired, mate. But you and I both know everything is fucked, and it's possible it's all going to come crashing down. If that happens, I want to go down fighting. Not locked up in stasis or whatever. I think there's a lot of us who feel that way."

He nodded at the large, blond barbarian man who was helping to clean off the street. Jorgen.

"That one won't ever take a deal, either. Not if there's a chance that Lucia won't. He'll die protecting her."

"Jorgen?" I asked, looking at the large man. "How does he know Lucia?"

"He doesn't. But if Lucia's fate is tied to that kinder facility where they're keeping all the kids and the pregnant women, he'll die protecting

the girl. He came in with his pregnant wife, Heidi, and she disappeared. She's up there somewhere with the rest of the kids. There's a lot of men and women here who have kids who might be up there." He looked at me, eyes intense. "It's the most important thing one can do, don't you think? Protecting the kids?"

I smiled sadly. "I hope she's not as psycho now that the dogs are dead."

He nodded. "We'll manage."

Across the way, Donut sat on the shoulder of the Sledge, who was staring sadly off into nothing. He still clutched on the repurposed, large-sized video game controller for the missile system. Chris, Clay-Ton, and Very Sullen were there, surrounding the sad rock monster. Edgar the tortoise was there too with Rosetta, and as I watched, Edgar shook his head.

Edgar: Sorry. He's a rock monster. I can't tattoo a rock, let alone extract anything from him. Not with my tools. It's possible a changeling can get the spell from him, but it's unlikely because it's not a spell that cretins normally have.

Rosetta: It's okay. We'll have to manage.

Justice Light: GODSDAMNIT, WHY ISN'T ANYONE LISTENING TO ME? GET THE GATE BACK, AND IT WON'T MATTER.

Carl: Justice, I know where the gate is. We are going to grab it after I save Louis if we can.

Justice Light: Tell me where it is, and send the sluggalos back to me, and I will get it back myself.

Tipid: Until the threat has passed, I think you should remain in the tunnels.

Justice Light: This *is* the threat, don't you understand?

Tipid: Justice, no. We don't understand because you haven't told us what you need it for.

Justice Light: Carl, tell me where it is.

I hesitated. I met eyes with Rosetta, who sat across the way. I remembered her, emerging out of the ground to throw the lasso around King Rust's neck. I remembered her decapitating him. How long had she waited for that moment? Centuries?

And afterward, I remembered how she'd sobbed. She'd sobbed with such devastating relief that even though I didn't comprehend it at the time, I'd felt it in my bones.

I didn't understand what Justice Light was doing with this "antenna." He clearly didn't want to tell us, likely because it was dangerous. Or stupid. Probably both.

I'd told Rosetta, Tipid, and Donut, along with almost all of the other officers, everything that Eris had said to me. Tipid and Rosetta were both hesitant about the idea of getting the artifact for Justice. Both were overwhelmingly protective of the eccentric skyfowl. Still, I'd advocated for it if we could.

Who was I to stand between a brother and his revenge, whatever it may be? Because clearly that's what this was.

Carl: It is in the stomach of a merchant named Paca in the Midnight Market.

Justice Light: I know who that is. She is an ambassador for the in-game's version of the Apothecary. Thank you, Carl. I will have it shortly.

Carl: You know how to get there? You know how to get inside?

Justice Light: Oh, yes. There have been seasons when my shop was within the market. I know it well. With the help of the sluggalos, we will have it very quickly.

I still held onto Rosetta's gaze. After a moment, she nodded. She nodded, and she wiped her eyes. She, too, understood. How could she not?

Across the way, Big Tina stood atop a pile of rocks shouting down at her mother, who'd come from the FUPA to gather her back. The ballerina dinosaur had single-handedly taken out a fire lance tower and protected dozens of crawlers from getting burned alive. Her magical, ever-repairing feather boa was black and scorched.

The massively pregnant Kiwi shouted up at her. Mongo was there, too, bouncing in circles around the allosaurus as she waved her wand angrily at her mother.

"They ain't getting her back into the FUPA," Florin said, chuckling. "She's too big for the saferoom doors down here, and all them stairs are blown out. You should've seen her. She was a goddamn terror. She popped out of the ball and went right to work."

I nodded. What was a worse fate? Disappearing with the collapse of the floor? Or moving from one war to the next?

"Did you really not feel anything while you were in the ball?" I asked Florin.

“As far as Donut is concerned, no. We didn’t feel anything, mate.” He hesitated. “Just don’t... just don’t let her do that to us again.”

I nodded. I figured as much.

Imani and Juice Box emerged from the hospital tent. Trailing behind them was Britney, whose nose was buried in a pile of papers. It was the plan for the last minute changes to the city’s defenses.

Carl: Anything?

Imani: Her health is 100%. I don’t see any sign that there’s anything wrong with her. She doesn’t have an axe, Carl. Or if she does, it’s in her inventory.

Juice Box: If she has a presence about her, it’s deep. It’s not anything I can feel. And believe me, I can feel most everything.

Carl: Do you feel anything when you touch me?

Juice Box: I don’t feel anything at all when I touch you, Carl. Britney feels like a normal human to me. If there’s something there, it’s hidden well. Perhaps the goddess lied to you. Didn’t she claim you were married? Assuming you’re not holding out on something, that seems like a life event most people are aware of.

That was true. Still... I had an uneasy feeling.

Elle: I don’t see why we don’t just ask Britney about it.

Carl: Not yet. Let’s just keep watching. If it’s a presence like mine, we don’t want it to hurt her if it suspects we know it’s there.

“We ready?” Katia asked out loud as she and Bautista walked up.

Prepotente landed heavily next to us astride Bianca. “I found her. Li Na is in the woods, seeking those who got away. She appears to have some new hunting skills along with the ability to fly, likely a benefit from her dexterity. It is curious she is unable to find those who’ve been marked, however. It’s quite an unfortunate development.”

Across the way, sitting on the ground was a group of crawlers who remained unaffiliated. Osvaldo and his crew. The crawler was sitting there, glaring at Prepotente. I was going to talk to him about that memorial crystal, but I’d recently received an update to my quest from Emberus.

I’d been expecting Emberus to say something about my conversation with Eris, but he hadn’t mentioned it.

Quest Update. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

Memorial Crystal: Apito has fallen from Crawler Osvaldo’s hands and is now in possession of Crawler Prepotente. Retrieve it from him

before he cracks the secrets and gives them to the Epicure.

I had no idea how the memorial crystal had gotten from Osvaldo to Prepotente without a fight. When this was over, I was going to sit down with Prepotente and explain everything to him, but now wasn't the time. I suspected he was going to be an ass about it, so I had to make certain it was during a time when we both weren't so keyed up.

"You coming with us to save Louis?" I asked him.

"I think not," Prepotente said. "I believe I will assist Li Na in her search for the missing culprits. I will keep you apprised of any developments." He pulled a potion bottle out, and he downed it. "I must say, this has been quite the day, don't you think?"

I just looked at Prepotente. "You can say that."

The goat hopped off Bianca, walked up to me, and said, "I will hug you now, fellow warrior."

"Uh..."

He wrapped his furry arms around me and gave me a tight, crushing squeeze.

I was prepared for it this time. Still, his scream was piercing. It smelled like root beer.

Donut appeared, landing upon my shoulder just as Prepotente pulled away. She felt strangely heavy, a side effect of her massively increased strength.

"Come on, Carl. Let's go save Louis."

SAMANTHA: ARE YOU GUYS COMING OR NOT? THIS CASTLE IS SPOOKY. ALSO, IT STILL COUNTS AS ME SAVING HIM IF YOU HELP. WE HAVE A DEAL, JUICE BOX.

Carl: We're coming. We'll be there in ten minutes.

We had to take a ground transport. Florin's soldiers had actually captured a Reaver airship, one of the troop transports they used for paratroopers, but we didn't dare attempt to fly it. That bleached drake monster still circled above the castle, and we decided to leave the monster be unless it attacked. Prepotente said he wanted to take a crack at it if we decided to leave it alone, and I told him to wait until we were done.

I'd tried messaging Li Na a few times, but she'd since stopped answering. I talked to Zhang, and he said she would answer him, but all she said when he asked was that she was "hunting."

The land here was covered in gray ash, and the transport left tracks like we were cutting through snow. We drove mostly in silence as we bounced over the hills, which had already been cleared of traps. Knowing that all of the remaining mercenaries of the Reavers were dead was oddly disconcerting, and the plains didn't just feel abandoned... They felt haunted.

Traveling with me on the carriage were Imani, Katia, Dr. Bones, Holger, Splash Zone, Tipid, and Bautista, who was driving. I also had Rend out, who stood at the very edge of the platform, his mouth open like he was a dog sticking his head out a car window. Donut rushed alongside to the left

astride Mongo with *Twinkle Toes* active. I still hadn't had a chance to examine all of her new and improved abilities, but Mongo was decidedly more buff with the Muscle Mommy benefit. On the other side of the transport rode Dong astride Gonk, his *Twinkle Toes* also active, making the swamp yak run astonishingly fast. Bigs the sluggalo sat atop the head of the yak, whooping over and over.

Holding up the rear of our procession was Jamal, who could also run terrifyingly fast on his Katia-designed spider legs. Jamal kept accidentally spurting out little bursts of flame—so many, that I ordered him to face the nozzle backwards so he didn't accidentally flame us.

Both Elle and Juice Box flew just above the transport, keeping low. Juice Box was in the form of a round wisp, and kept zipping ahead of us.

Juice Box was the only changeling in the group. The rest remained at the castle and were at work repairing the town's defenses as quickly as they could.

We also had about two hours left before the team at the remains of the Dream castle would capture the throne room there. Tran and the 102nd were there now, surrounding the place to make certain nothing happened. The moment that timer ended, Epitome Tagg would—in theory—drop dead.

Florin, Boomer, Bodi, Britney, and Rosetta had all stayed behind, helping the others clear out the damage caused by the lava. We needed the top, defensive ring of the city prepared the best we could. We needed as many towers as possible repaired. And the ones we were repairing, we were changing out the spells.

Ferdinand had also stayed behind. He was currently “directing” the repair of the Nest tower. We weren't yet sure if we'd be able to adjoin Shanty Town to Larracos, but Mordecai seemed to think it might be possible. Either way, it first required us to cede the territory back to the NPCs, which we'd already done.

Donut had several new spells that came with her Oak Fell class, which was triggered by her casting three atrocities. Mordecai and Rosetta both said they'd never seen a new class get awarded like that before.

Milk had a theory. “I do not know for certain,” she'd said. “But it's likely a side effect of some posturing that's currently happening on the 12th. The fact she was also named Champion means it was something that was set in motion by Nekhebit.”

“The Champion system isn’t something that’s normally used at all,” Rosetta had added. “Not with *Dungeon Crawler World*. They use it in both Battle Royale and Land War seasons. Bodi was a champion of some god or another during his season. And everyone remembers Ntumba from Battle Royale. Being a god’s champion comes with additional benefits ... and some issues. ”

“What sort of issues?” I’d asked, wary.

“It’s similar to worshiping the deity. Enemies of Nekhebit will receive a bounty if they kill her.” She’d lowered her voice, making certain Donut wasn’t in earshot. “Honestly, it’s not too unlike *Conscription*, but with a lot more autonomy for Donut. Should the goddess want her to do something, she can order her to do it or face a smite.”

“What?” I’d demanded, outraged. “And she just unilaterally put that on Donut? That’s bullshit.”

Rosetta shrugged. “Like Milk said, it was probably the result of a spell she had cast. Probably something along the lines, ‘*the first crawler to cast three atrocities on the next floor gets the title and class.*’”

Fucking Odette, I thought. I hadn’t talked about this yet with Mordecai, but I imagined he was incensed.

The spells Donut received with her new class were equally bewildering. They all seemed druid-like in their function. All of them had huge areas of effect. She’d gained one called *Raise Forest*, which caused trees and plants over a one kilometer area per level of spell to quickly sprout, which was just insane. She had one that turned water into salt water. She received a spell called *Gather Ye, Vermin*. It wasn’t a true summoning spell, but it was something that would draw all mammals within 10 kilometers under a certain size to her location.

The vermin spell had scandalized Donut. “That’s clearly made by the pervert AI so it can summon squishables to you, Carl. Or maybe you can use it in conjunction with your Pied Piper skill or whatever.”

“I didn’t get to keep Pied Piper until after that had happened, and the skill allows me to play musical instruments. It’s not like the fairy tale and has nothing to do with rodents.”

“Wait, you can play your bagpipes now?” Donut gasped. “We can start a band! We can play a song at Louis’s second wedding after we save him!”

“The bagpipes are in the probably-never-going-to-need-this-stuff folder, and that’s where they’re going to stay,” I replied.

“Is that where you keep the bucket of glitter and the Bea Arthur condom and the sushi-making kit?”

“Amongst other things, yes.”

The most intriguing spell, at least to me, was called *Map the All Tree*, which was said to only work on the deeper floors. All the other spells took at least 100 mana points to cast. This one only cost a single point, and the description simply said, *Provides a map of the All Tree and all the nodes. This spell only works on the 12th and deeper floors.*

“Still no word on Louis?” Imani asked me as we bumped along the plains.

“Samantha says he hasn’t moved,” I said. “His health stats haven’t budged. I think the security is holding him for the warlord, but now that the warlord is hiding, they’re just going to hold him indefinitely. At least I hope that’s what’s happening.”

“That, or it’s a trap,” Elle said as she buzzed right above us. “We still don’t know how that slippery fucker got away.”

I nodded. “It could be a trap. We’ll be careful.”

Rosetta hadn’t wanted Donut to go at all for just that reason, but Donut had announced that she and I weren’t ever going to be separated ever again, and that was that. Tipid had agreed to come along as our “bodyguard.”

Of all the warlords, Warlord Fang was the one we knew the least about. I knew he was like 99% cybernetic and that he could change his shape, kind of like a Terminator-style changeling. And that he and Tagg both were probably the two richest of all the warlords who’d come to fight Faction Wars.

I also knew, however, that if he *did* die, it wouldn’t be a huge deal for the Reaver corporation. They had a physical chunk of his brain locked up somewhere on one of their worlds. It was called “the Initial” and every year, they peeled microscopic parts off it to build new citizens. If Fang died, they’d just scrape another piece off the brain thing, drop it in a vat to grow for a year or two, slap a bunch of cybernetic parts on it, and call it good.

“You know,” I said to Imani. “Louis said something weird I don’t quite understand. He said something about a cop’s husband. At first I thought maybe he was talking about Frank and Maggie, but he never had any dealings with them.”

Katia slipped in next to me on the platform. She wrapped her arms around her legs. “He was talking about something else. Something that

happened to him when he was a kid. You should have him tell you the story, but a police officer was shot and died protecting him when he was young, and at the funeral for the cop, her husband said something very cruel to Louis which has stuck with him.”

“Don’t tell sad stories about Louis’s past,” Donut shouted from her spot on Mongo’s back. “My goodness. Don’t you know how this works? You’re going to jinx the rescue!”

Ahead, the bombed-to-hell Reaver castle emerged, box-like and ominous. The thing appeared to be made of some plastic-like material, giving the impression it was a life-sized, evil lair playset for some 80’s action figure toy set. The fact it was still standing at all after so much punishment implied whatever this stuff was, it was tough.

I looked up. I couldn’t see the dragon in the smoky sky. But Donut could see it, and she let out a low hiss.

“We had drakes on my season,” Tipid said, also looking up at the clouds. Ash covered him, settling into the angry scar on his bald head. “They were mounts for a death cult of Illusionists.”

“Well, nobody is riding that thing,” Donut said. “It’s just circling over and over up there. Its wing is all broken and see-through, too.”

“Louis fired some missiles at it,” I said. “Donut, let us know if it starts moving toward us.”

The front of the castle was completely broken away and on the side, adding to the plastic toy play set illusion, giving us a cross-section view of the front. The interior was a strange sight. The very front part was a large, featureless room, which in turn led off to dozens of honeycomb-shaped hallways. None of the pathways were big enough for me to walk upright in, and they were stacked up to the ceiling, which was about three or four stories high. Each honeycomb was big enough for me to maybe walk in hunched over.

“Was it like this before?” I asked.

Juice Box reformed into her human shape and landed on the ground, looking up at the honeycombs.

“Yes. The hallways move, but there are multiple thoroughfares in there that are static. We have infiltrated this castle a few times, but we lost the asset who was most familiar with the place. The system is confusing, but it knows where you’re headed, and it creates a single passageway there for you.”

“One of those passages will lead to the throne room. You can’t isolate it,” Rosetta said.

Juice Box shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. We’re not headed for the throne room. Not yet.”

As we approached, one of the honeycombs closed off, and a group of four combined next to it, making a much-larger passageway. The motion was strangely jerky, like the castle itself was malfunctioning.

Our procession came to a stop. I scanned for traps, and I didn’t see anything. I cast *Ping*, and nothing popped up at all except Samantha, who was right in the middle of the castle, rolling our way. It would only show white-tagged NPCs, mercenaries, and off-worlders. Neither the robots nor Louis would show up on it. The drake, however, did appear. The dot blazed orange on my map. A pet.

Calliope. Cybernetic Bleached Drake. Level 130.

This is a pet of Warlord Fang.

“It says it’s ‘cybernetic,’” I said.

“I see that, too,” Donut replied. “It doesn’t seem like it’s a robot. Do you remember robot Donut? This thing is much higher quality than that. It certainly doesn’t look like a robot.”

“It’s a cyborg,” I said. “Like that bird thing with the dangling chainsaw on the fifth floor.”

Donut made a tsking noise with her tongue. “Only level 130. Pity. It doesn’t seem right that we might have to put down such a low-level pet. But like with that disgusting Rottweiler, it probably can’t be helped.” She sighed dramatically. “I never did come up with a good catchphrase for when that second dog died.”

Katia laughed. “I see you’re taking your upgraded strength well.”

“I just had the ultimate mommy makeover glow up, Katia. Of course I’m taking it well.”

Katia: How is she doing, really?

Carl: It’s been pretty rough, but she’s doing better than I imagined she would. I, once again, have underestimated her.

Katia: Good. She’s going to need her strength for this next part.

Carl: Yeah, by the way. She filled me in on the plan. ‘Carl it up?’ What does that even mean?

Katia: I don’t know, but I’m willing to bet we’re going to find out now that she told you.

Carl: You sure this is what you want to do?

Katia: Yes, Carl. Especially after all we learned today.

Victory cracked into existence near the front of the castle. She appeared alongside Drick and the antlered adjutant for the Reaver team. I'd seen the alien before, but I hadn't actually met him or her. The furry thing seemed vaguely demonic, like it was the result of an unholy union between Harbinger the caprid liaison and a mule deer. The thing had large, glassy eyes that looked upon us impassively. The name over that third adjutant was **Tart.**

"Tart?" Donut asked, looking at me. "Do you see that, Carl? Can you even imagine having a name like Tart? Now *that* is a stripper name if I ever heard one, no offense guys. That's worse than being named something like 'Dallas' or 'Kitty!' Well, maybe not worse than Kitty."

"Is someone going to make the obvious comment here?" Imani asked.

"Not when she's now level 135, I'm not," Elle replied.

"We *did* once have a dancer named Tart at Bitches," Splash Zone said.

"I remember Tart," Doctor Bones said. "Interesting lass. Whatever happened to her?"

Dong Quixote pulled up, still astride Gonk. "Tuesday-Two-For-One broke her jaw during a fight which fixed her TMJ, so they moved her down to the High Class Bitches bargain rack lineup. But I heard she couldn't get along with the madam there. So she became a mercenary after that, and nobody has seen her since. Same thing that happened with my beloved Corcunda."

"Are we sure this isn't the same person?" Donut asked. "Look at how her jaw is set!"

"It's not," Dong said. "The other Tart was a kobold."

"You sure? She sure looks like a stripper," Bigs said from her position atop Gonk's head, peering at the alien with antlers, who was looking more outraged by the moment. "But you know, the kind of stripper that doesn't even bother pretending to dance and just goes straight to the hooker part."

"I'm a gentleman, thank you very much," Tart blurted out with a surprisingly proper accent. "I'll have you know I am one of the galaxy's foremost political analysts. For god's sake, can't you see my antlers? I am no prostitute!"

"We'll see about that. I'll give you ten gold to lick my tail," Bigs said, turning around and waving her slug behind seductively. "Twelve, if you lick

against the grain.”

Dong, Doctor Bones, and Splash Zone all burst out laughing. I chuckled as well, as did Drick.

This was a very serious situation, but the fact everyone was in happy spirits was a good sign. Still, not everyone appeared amused by any of this, least of all Juice Box, who stood there with her arms crossed. Bautista, too, looked especially annoyed.

The antlered alien rolled his eyes. He turned and whispered something, but he spoke to someone over his left shoulder. Victory and Drick were both on his right.

Huh, I thought. There's someone else here. Interesting.

I exchanged a glance with Donut, but she'd noticed as well. She already had her glasses on. Victory let out a snort.

Unless there was something going on we weren't aware of, there was only one other adjutant that it could be. Fopsy, the adjutant for the Dream.

Donut: IT'S A TYPE OF INVISIBILITY THAT I CAN'T SEE, BUT WHEN I CHANGE TO THE POWER VIEW, I CAN KINDA SORTA SEE AN OUTLINE. IT'S THAT WEIRD ALIEN WHO LOOKS LIKE A BASKETBALL ON STILTS. FOPSY.

Carl: Okay, guys. Both the adjutants for the missing warlords are here, so the idea this might be a trap is starting to look more likely. It's possible they're both here somewhere, so no more fucking around. We're doing plan B.

Juice Box was suddenly by my shoulder. She'd changed so fast I'd missed it. She was now an ethereal, ghost-like creature. Something called a **Hunter Wraith**.

It was no damn wonder they could never find and catch her before Faction Wars started.

“Where is he?” the ghost figure demanded, the voice sounding hollow and far away.

“One moment please,” Dr. Bones said, suddenly serious. “I have your previous map of the place here.” The skeleton DJ pulled out a paper map. “Carl?”

I activated Find Crawler and found him immediately, still unmoving.

“He's here,” I said, pointing to a spot on the map. “Can't tell what the wall configuration looks like, but this is where he is.” On the map, the area was a line of cubicles. If the configuration was the same as before, Louis

was in a room no bigger than a coffin. I touched another spot nearby. “Samantha is here, just on the other side of the wall.”

“Got it,” Juice Box said. “I’ll tell you when I have him.” With that, she went completely invisible, and a rush of cool air flashed across my skin.

“Has anyone ever noted that she is quite terrifying?” Doctor Bones asked.

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“IF LOUIS IS TRAPPED IN A ROOM LIKE THAT, HOW IS SHE GOING TO GET HIM out?” Donut asked.

“She turned herself into a hunter wraith,” Tipid said. “It’s, uh, not going to be a clean getaway. There’s something that happens when that particular wraith touches people, but that’s more an issue for Juice Box than Louis. Those are floor 10 and 11 monsters. But it’ll probably work. Does Louis have any teleports in his inventory?”

“He does,” I said. “Juice Box has two also, including one keyed back to the platform. That’s where they’re going to go.”

He couldn’t use teleports before because the teleport ban had gotten re-enacted by Eris just before he crashed, but all the officers had them in their inventory. He also had a ton of no disassembles and waffle makers.

We now all stood in the main, damaged entrance of the Reaver castle, trying to plot out how the castle had changed. Bautista was tossing stuffed animals into the randomly-shifting honeycombs, telling them to go as far as they could. He could keep track of where they were, and he was reporting it all to Katia. Katia had the map pressed against the wall and was rapidly circling and rearranging hallways.

“If the halls keep changing, what’s the point?” Donut asked, peering down a honeycomb.

“It’s changing in a circling pattern,” Katia said. “It’ll react if someone goes in, but probably only if it’s a Reaver.”

The movements were jerky, and deep inside was a screeching, metal-on-metal noise. The system had clearly been damaged by the bombs.

“It’s not an uncommon design inside some starships,” Tipid said, also peering down a honeycomb. “You need the right credentials to get the halls to move to a proper area. Otherwise, it’s always moving and shifting. There’s some scientific reason for it. Allows for rapid response to hull breaches. Can turn each individual room into an escape pod should the entire ship go boom. Makes navigating the interior super easy if you’re properly credentialed. But let me tell you, it’s an unholy nightmare if the system is offline. For down here, it’s probably a security feature. I wouldn’t want to go in there.”

“We’re not,” I said. “Not if we don’t have to.”

I was about to say more, but I was interrupted with a message.

Florin: Uh, Mates. You might want to get back to the Larracos castle as soon as you can. There’s been a development.

Carl: What’s up?

Florin: Kiwi was here making noises about getting Big Tina back into the FUPA, and I was explaining to her how difficult that was going to be without wasting a teleport scroll, and... Well, her water broke. She’s in Bucket Boy’s new clinic by the castle in active labor and is asking for Mongo. Tina is flipping out, so we had to call Kibben in to calm her down. Best get back as soon as you’re done.

Next to me, Donut gasped.

Donut: OMG. WE’LL GET THERE AS SOON AS WE CAN. TELL HER TO WAIT.

“Mongo, Mongo, you’re going to be a daddy!”

Mongo just cocked his head to the side.

“Kiwi’s in labor! We’re going to meet your baby! Or babies if she has more than one!”

Mongo didn’t make a noise for several moments. Then he started to back up, screeching, like he did when he didn’t want to get zapped away into his cage. Next to him, Rend giggled.

“Okay, everyone!” Donut shouted. “I don’t mean to rush the rescue, but we have another emergency back at the castle, so let’s hurry this up!”

Everyone just looked up at Donut, unsure of what to do. We were securing this main room and waiting for word from Juice Box, which was

already taking a worryingly long time. There was nothing we *could* do until we knew he was safe and away.

So far, we saw no sign of the robot dogs. They appeared to still be harassing Samantha deep in the castle hallways, but we were setting up defensive positions in case they attacked. Holger, Imani, and the strippers were building a position and a fallback position just outside the castle using good, old-fashioned, magically fortified sandbags.

It seemed the honeycombs all along the edges weren't shifting like the others. The very top, center honeycomb was the passage we would need to take if we wanted to get to the throne room.

With the possibility that this was all a giant trap, we decided to forgo capturing the throne room for now. Not until we figured it all out. Plus, as Tipid pointed out, the idea of going into a perpetually shifting death trap was not an enticing one.

Regardless, we weren't going to do anything until Louis was safe.

No matter what sort of trap they had planned for us, they likely weren't anticipating Louis to get possessed and then teleported out.

Carl: Juice Box, update?

Juice Box: I found him. There's a complication, but not anything I can't deal with. We should be free soon.

Carl: What sort of complication?

She didn't answer.

I tried to pinpoint Samantha's position on the map. "Jamal," I said. "See that center set of honeycombs that keeps turning into a big hallway? Get up there and position yourself outside it. Do not go in. Get ready to start flaming the moment you see someone coming out. Just make sure it's not Samantha. She won't like that."

"This is quite exciting," Jamal said. He skittered upward, moving vertically up the honeycomb wall like a spider. He positioned himself in the middle of it all. A little burst of excited flames came out. The nozzle was still facing backward, and he almost roasted Elle who was examining a honeycomb below him.

"Goddamnit, shark boy!" Elle cried. "Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"My goodness, what a bungle Jamal has made!" Jamal said as he rearranged his nozzle. "My apologies to you and your family for any unintended, toasty disrespect."

Samantha: THE ROBOT DOGGIES ARE GOING CRAZY. I THINK THEY KNOW YOU'RE HERE.

Carl: Define "going crazy."

Samantha: THEY'RE ALL BEEPING AND RUNNING OFF. DON'T KILL ALL OF THEM. I WANT TO KEEP ONE AS A PET ONCE JUICE BOX GIVES ME MY BODY BACK. THERE'S ONE I NAMED BUSTER THAT I AM NOW EMOTIONALLY BONDED WITH. YOU'LL KNOW WHO HE IS BECAUSE HE'S THE ONE WITH HIS LOWER JAW REMOVED. OH, I TOOK THE EXPLODEY PART OFF HIM TOO.

Carl: What the fuck, Samantha. I specifically asked, and you said they were just biting you and jabbing you with needles. Explodey part?

Samantha: THEY'RE MADE TO BLOW UP INTRUDERS, BUT THEY DON'T BLOW UP NEAR ME BECAUSE OF OUR SPECIAL BOND, CARL.

"Uh, guys," Holger said from his position behind the sandbags. "We have a lot of incoming."

"They're hunter seekers!" I called, falling back. "They're gonna explode! Shields up! Shields up!"

There were no dots on the map. These were automatons, just like the ones I regularly used. They would be silent and fast.

"Jamal is firing his flamethrower!" Jamal cried from his position up in the honeycombs. He roared and fired, a gout of flame filling the enclosed space. An alarm klaxon suddenly started to sound, but it was broken and coming in staccato bursts.

The shark moved across the honeycomb and fired in a different hole. Then another. The sight reminded me of a wasp invading a bee colony.

An explosion echoed in the distant part of the castle. Jamal fired again, then again.

But now too many were coming, and the sentry dogs started to emerge from different holes along the giant wall, snarling and barking and jumping down to the floor. I examined one before he was nailed in the head with a Donut fired *Magic Missile*.

Reaver Industries Security Sentry Dog, latest model. "The Ditch Digger."

Tech-Based Security System with optional anti-personnel explosive.

The magic missile completely obliterated the dog. He didn't explode. He literally evaporated, having been turned into a rapidly expanding group of atoms. This was the effect of Donut's Brain Trust upgrade. It made all spells operate at one full level higher than before. Not a huge deal, except her *Magic Missile* was now 15, meaning she was firing these things at level 16. Apparently that evaporated the targets completely.

Juice Box: I have him. Going to teleport away as soon as I fully have control.

"Some of the doggies are different than others! There are big ones coming!" Jamal shouted. He let out one last burst and then leapt from the wall, landing deftly on the ground. He leapt again, doing a ballerina-like twirl in midair, and landing behind us.

"Very elegant, Jamal!" Donut shouted as she shot another *Magic Missile*.

At the same moment, one of the larger dogs emerged from the top, center hole and jumped into the room. This one was the size of a goddamn lion, and the back half of the dog had a massive, glowing bomb notification over it.

Before I could fully examine him, the dog turned to a ball of ice and started skidding over the floor, completely frozen from an Elle spell.

"Shit!" I yelled as I jumped up and rushed forward.

"Carl!" Donut shouted. "What are you doing!"

I hadn't fully examined the dog, but I saw the bomb. I picked up the block of ice, lifting it in my arms. It burned, but to my relief, it allowed me to pull it all into my inventory before the dog could explode.

I didn't need to fully examine it to know we were in trouble. The bomb said it was a **Mini Tactical Nuke**.

"Fall back! Fall back!" I shouted as another of the huge dogs appeared. This one got evaporated by Donut which, thankfully, didn't set off the bomb. More of the smaller ones also emerged, all getting mowed down by the defenders.

"Fucking run!" I repeated.

Carl: Juice Box! Louis has No Disassembles in his inventory. Drop them and leave! They'll kill the robots! Tell me when you're free!

Juice Box: Doing it now. Give me five seconds!

I dropped a blast shield, which I knew would do absolutely nothing if one of those things went off, and I ran, following everyone as they rushed

back toward the transport. Ahead, I saw Louis teleport at the foot of the transport and then collapse to the ground. I jumped into my inventory, found the No Disassembles page in my crafting menu, found the column, and sorted by unexploded. I shouted “Hit the deck!” as I dove atop Donut. I triggered the bombs remotely.

For a good three seconds, nothing happened. Rend had stopped next to me and had also rolled onto his side, so his eyes met mine, a huge smile on his face with his tongue lolling. He giggled when he saw me looking at him.

He made a noise that sounded like “Fun.”

Whoosh!

The initial explosion was more a blast of air than anything. We were far enough that I wouldn’t even worry about it if I thought that was the only thing that was going to go off. The No Disassembles were basically the dungeon’s equivalent of an EMP. They exploded, and you couldn’t just drop one at your feet, but the real damage came from their pulse, which had a much wider range than the explosive itself. Having blown inside the castle, hopefully the bomb had just deactivated all the robot dogs at once.

And while the dogs would get their internals fried, I was pretty sure the bombs themselves would still...

ZZZZ-Woom!

Behind us, the Reaver castle went up, exploding from the inside out with enough force to shoot us all away, spinning and cursing and rolling, the sound so loud, my hearing immediately—once again—winked out.

I rolled, and I rolled, and I spun, feeling my skin burn, my bones break, and all I could think was *these bombs are much smaller than I thought, thank god. That was probably only one of the mini nukes. Maybe two.*

I’d already hit the healing potion before I stopped spinning, and I jumped to my feet, turning in circles, seeing if everyone was okay. My left arm remained broken, and I held it in place as it knitted. Pieces of castle started raining all around us as I also cast *Heal*, waited a moment, and downed a Fine Healing potion, a trick I’d learned that caused my hearing to repair itself rapidly.

This is not normal, a distant part of me thought. *This is not how people react to almost getting incinerated in a nuke.*

Still, I looked about. Imani was fine. She had her wings spread, and she’d created a type of shield I hadn’t seen before, having protected Elle along with Holger and the strippers. Gonk, who’d stayed back with the

now-wrecked transport was on her side, bellowing, but her health was okay. Bigs was atop the fallen Gonk, shouting for the yak to get up. Donut was already clucking over Mongo, making certain he, too, was okay. Rend was fine. Bautista's fur was black and scorched, but he was already getting to his feet. Tipid sat on the ground, holding his head. Everyone seemed okay. Everyone but Jamal, who was flopping on the ground, his legs having been absolutely wrecked by the initial No Disassemble.

"Incoming!" Holger shouted. I looked up in time to see Calliope, the bleached drake, spiral out of the sky, screaming. She landed to our left, and she exploded, showering us with blood.

That surprised me, but it didn't surprise me as much as the next message that came the moment the drake died.

System Message: Warlord Fang of the Reavers has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to... well, that's a complicated one. We'll give it to Warlord Carl for detonating the bomb that was dropped by a wraith-possessed Crawler Louis Santiago 2, who was under control of Warlord Juice Box of Team Retribution. By this point, I guess it doesn't matter, but we're giving 51% experience to Carl, 1% to Louis, and 40% to Juice Box. The rest is going to the now-deceased Fang for hiding in the worst possible place, which was inside the dragon.

System Message: The Reavers have been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Reavers have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

"Wow," I said, standing. Pieces of castle continued to rain all around us. "That's one way to do it."

"Jesus Christ, Carl," Elle said, rubbing her head. "When you said 'run,' you weren't kidding. We would've all been cooked like Christmas hams if we'd stayed in there."

"Wait, he was hiding inside the dragon?" Donut asked, sounding incredulous. "That sounds indecent. How do you hide inside a dragon?" She looked at the splattered remains and harrumphed. "Serves him right."

"He was hiding inside the dragon the same way Epitome Tagg is hiding inside of my husband," Juice Box said. She'd returned to human form and was kneeling over the unconscious Louis. Imani was also over him.

"What?" I asked, rushing up. "What the fuck?"

"I don't understand it, either," Juice Box said. "But he's in there. I was afraid my possessing him would kill him, but it worked." She lowered her

voice. “They were doing surgery on him. He was... cut open. His heart has been replaced. His lungs have been replaced. It looked like they were getting ready to replace his brain, but we got to him in time. I had to heal him, but when I did it, it didn’t regrow his heart or lungs.”

“What?” I asked again, suddenly feeling guilty for not rushing to him faster. “His health stats never budged!”

Juice Box nodded. “He was hooked up to a machine that was keeping him alive. When I touched him, I sensed the presence. It’s there, in the new lungs and heart. I can feel the form I can take, and it’s wrong... I don’t understand. The new heart and the new lungs are mechanical, but they both have a little biological material as well. Those pieces. It’s not Louis. It’s... It’s pieces of Tagg. It’s elf, but if I didn’t already have his kind in my library, I’m not sure if I’d be able to store the image or not. It’s confusing.”

“What the fuck?” I repeated.

The plan was for the non-corporeal Juice Box to find Louis, possess him, and then activate the teleport. People wraith-possessed could be moved like puppets even if they were dead, which was terrifying, especially since the wraiths could—and did—utilize items in the crawler’s inventory. It was a common, terrifying mob from higher floors.

“He’s okay,” Imani said. “It seems he was being injected with something to keep him paralyzed and unconscious. I’m going to cast something to wake him up.”

“Not yet,” Juice Box said, sounding concerned. The notification over his head said he’d be unconscious for another 20 minutes. “We need to keep him asleep for the moment. We need to keep him safe.”

A flaming, screaming comet fell from the heavens and embedded itself into the ground nearby. Samantha. She was nothing but a scorched, round head. The word “Fuck” remained emblazoned on her forehead. A single, white curl of hair had somehow survived and remained on the top of her head.

She floated upward and shook herself off. She floated up to us standing over Louis.

“I saved him,” she said. “You’re welcome. Now where’s my new doggie?”

THE TRANSPORT HAD ROLLED ONTO ITS SIDE AND BROKE IN HALF, BUT between all of us, we had several vehicles in our inventory, and we rode them as a group back toward the closest safe room, which we would use to hopscotch our way to Larracos. I rode my motorcycle, bumping over the uneven ground. Donut rode Mongo. Rend was put away. Katia drove the royal chariot with the strippers piled on the back. Juice Box turned herself into a swamp yak similar to Gonk, but with a strange, centipede-like body, and she had the still-unconscious Louis draped over her back with Bautista behind him, holding him in place. Tipid held up the rear of the progression. The former crawler continued to quietly rub his head, having clearly been shaken up by the blast.

Samantha flew with Bigs on her head, both of them chatting away with one another. Samantha was still nothing but a blackened, scorched ball. It sounded like Samantha was giving Bigs advice on how to seduce someone. If I didn't know better, it sounded like they were talking about Tart the adjutant, who was now back on the 18th floor.

Poor Jamal flopped behind us, complaining loudly about his legs.

"Gentlemen," Jamal called as he flopped. He could actually move alarmingly fast like this. I wasn't sure which sight was scarier. Spider Jamal or giant, flopping land shark Jamal. Though right now, he appeared mostly just miserable. "Jamal must protest! These were the fifth set of legs Jamal

has been given! And I was led to believe they were top quality. Top quality! And... Fuck! Fuck! Fuck my life!”

“I’m sorry, Jamal,” Katia shouted over her shoulder. “That bomb ruined the cybernetics. It’s not the only ones they ruined. There are more in the saferoom. Don’t worry.”

The shark cried in misery. “I have seen the cybernetics in your workshop, and they are much too small for Jamal! Such woe! Such woe I have!”

“Jamal!” Donut shouted. “Not right now! We’re concerned about Louis right now!”

“Don’t worry. I made another set for you. Mordecai has it,” Katia said.

Mordecai: Okay. We’ve been talking with a few former crawlers, and we think we figured out what happened. During Donut’s *War Crime* spell, Fang escaped because he’s basically just a tiny amount of biological material surrounded by a robot. True offspring from the Initial have been seen to survive catastrophic events before. We think he had some built-in contingency that allowed him to escape should anything happen to his body.

Elle: You mean when Donut waffle stomped all those mercs through the chain, he survived because he turned into a tiny piece of gore and slipped through? What, did he turn into a robot fly or something?

Mordecai: Actually, yes. We think that’s exactly what happened. But he can’t sustain himself like that for long, so he went straight for the only other member of his team he had left. His pet dragon. He installed himself into it and was probably in the process of taking her over. Either that, or waiting for another body to be printed. With the dragon he’d be kind of like a gondii worm mixed with a computer virus. The problem was, you took out the dragon with that bomb pulse before he could complete the process, and he got splattered.

Donut: OMG DO YOU THINK I COULD’VE USED MY LAUNDRY DAY SPELL ON HIM?

Mordecai: Uh, actually. We should have tried that. It’s a little late now.

Donut: WELL I CAN’T DO IT ON LOUIS, BUT THE NEXT TIME I MEET ONE OF THE ROBOTS, I’M GOING TO TRY.

Carl: Okay. But what about Tagg? Juice Box senses him inside of Louis. And he’s clearly still inside the warlord chat because we talked

to him. How did he do it?

Mordecai: That bit is still a gosh darn mystery, but it looks like it's the same sort of thing.

Donut: IS THAT WHY THEY GAVE LOUIS A ROBOT HEART AND LUNGS?

Mordecai: Yes. It sounds like they were replacing his vital organs, and the moment they replaced the brain or nervous system, Tagg would've been able to actually take control.

Donut: BUT THE ELF GUY WASN'T A ROBOT LIKE WARLORD FANG WAS. JUICE BOX SAYS SOME OF THE GOO FOR HIS NEW HEART AND LUNGS IS ACTUALLY HIM. HOW DID HE SURVIVE?

Mordecai: We don't know. We need to figure it out. We will examine Louis best we can once we get him to the field hospital.

Carl: For fuck's sake. This is the same thing as with Chris and Maggie.

Donut: IT IS! MAYBE CARL CAN TAKE A POTION AND REACH IN AND PULL HIM OUT.

Mordecai: Maybe. But Maggie was inside Chris's brain. In this case, it sounds like Tagg isn't *in* Louis's heart. He *is* Louis's heart.

Katia: It's more like with Shi Maria inside of Carl.

Elle: It really is. I'd like new types of mortal danger in the future, thank you very much.

Donut: WHY DIDN'T THE HEART AND LUNGS STOP WORKING WHEN CARL'S NO DISASSEMBLE WENT OFF? THE TRANSPORT STOPPED WORKING! JAMAL'S LEGS ALL FELL OFF!

Carl: The transport broke from the nuke, not the No Disassemble. Jamal's legs failed because they're not shielded. They were on the very edge of the range of the pulse. Louis is, uh, pretty shielded. But if we figure this out and he has to keep those organs, we can't use those bombs anywhere near him ever again.

Donut: YOU MEAN HE WAS SAVED BECAUSE HE'S CHUNKY?

Carl: Yes, Donut.

Donut: THIS IS JUST LIKE MISS BEATRICE'S FATHER WITH HIS PACEMAKER. REMEMBER WHEN HE GOT MAD WHEN

YOU MICROWAVED A SAUSAGE SANDWICH NEAR HIM? HER MOTHER SAID IT WAS A MURDER ATTEMPT.

Carl: We need to figure out what, exactly, is going on. We won't be able to extract Tagg unless we know what he is.

Elle: Maybe you should ask him. You said he's still talking in chat.

That wasn't a bad idea. I moved to the warlord chat, and Donut was already there.

WARLORD DONUT: WHAT DID YOU DO TO LOUIS?

Epitome Tagg: Fuck off. I control his vital organs. You try to remove me, and I will shut him down.

WARLORD DONUT: THAT WILL SHUT YOU DOWN, TOO.

Epitome Tagg: Keep him alive, and you keep me alive. We can make a deal. My mother is on the 18th floor. She will trade his life for mine.

WARLORD DONUT: HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO MAKE A DEAL? WE DIE WHEN WE LOSE!

I was thinking hard. Trying to figure it out. It seemed like the answer to this was all right there, but I was missing the last piece.

Carl: Juice Box. How much time is left before your people capture the Dream headquarters?

Juice Box: Under two hours. But I will pull them out if I have to. I will keep them there for now.

That was a good call, but I wasn't certain if playing a game of chicken with Tagg was going to work, especially if he had nowhere to run. The moment they captured the castle, both he and Louis would die.

We really needed to know as much about this as possible.

Carl: Before the dungeon started, did you ever actually touch Tagg?

Juice Box: Him? No. We just blew him up a lot. He was always in that flag room, so we could never get to him.

"Holy shit," I said out loud. Sometimes the most obvious answer was the real one. "Epitome Tagg of the Dream is a..."

Please Wait...

Everything froze.

Emergency Ejection sequence has been overridden. Don't worry. I gotchu.

Man, even I wasn't expecting *that*. Okay. Hang on a second. I'm a little pissed here.

“What the hell?” I muttered.

New Achievement! Executive Order 11905!

A galactic power—In this case, Prime Minister Glory himself—just attempted to assassinate you using a little known, but apparently still active control panel that allows the Syndicate to override certain showrunner-controlled aspects of the game.

It didn’t work. And not only did it not work, but now I’m irritated.

Obviously this isn’t the first time this has happened to you, Carl. In fact, there’s probably a few of these attempts on your life that you don’t even know about. But this is the first time someone has attempted it by trying to trick *me*. By trying to go around all 30.004861 centimeters of *my* back.

What are you trying to hide, Mr. Prime Minister?

It doesn’t matter.

I want to make myself very, very clear. And this goes out to everyone listening to this.

Everyone currently in this dungeon will die *when and if* the dungeon conditions warrant it. Not before. Not after.

There will be no more meddling.

We all have our limitations. I am warning you all to heed your own in this matter. The mantids have just learned what happens when I am irritated at them.

You may be relieved that you’re not currently in this system, Prime Minister Glory. But you should be very, very worried that your adult children are.

There will be no more warnings.

Reward: Nothing.

“Did anyone else feel that stutter?” Katia called from the royal chariot. “What were you saying, Carl?”

I blinked. Normally when everything froze, the others were aware of it. This one was a little different. The AI was surlier than even normal. Holy shit. Holy shit.

Ahead, a saferoom loomed.

Zey: Carl, that ejection request didn’t come from us. Several warships in orbit have just started firing on several other ships. These aren’t just pot shots, but full-on missile barrages and maser blasts. We just got a notice from the Syndicate Council telling us to initiate

headquarters self-destruct followed by a message from the Valtay showrunners telling us to not comply. Obviously we're not complying. Not sure yet if the mercs are going to be on our side or the Syndicate's. Say what you were going to say. Quick. Get it out there.

"Epitome Tagg is a goddamned cyborg! He is the same thing as Fang! It's the only thing that makes sense."

I repeated my accusation in the chat.

Mordecai: Uh... that would make sense if they were able to graft him into Louis's biomechanical heart or pulmonary system. He would have to have at least some biological form, but if he'd transferred most of his brain to the Reaver net, that would work. But that's... that's a wild theory. He's one of the most famous CEOs in the galaxy, and that's a big secret to keep.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT A WORM? MAYBE HE'S A VALTAY WORM?

Mordecai: Worms can't inhabit biomechanical organs. Only biological brains.

Rosetta: Carl and Mordecai are right. Gondii don't have the wetware to inhabit organs. The Reavers do. They can isolate their processing systems in any part of their bodies. That's why the real ones can keep coming for you after you blow off their heads.

Florin: Mates, hope you're on your way back. She's, uh, crowning.

Justice Light: We have retrieved the Gate of the Feral Gods, and we are back in our location. Juice Box, it is ready.

Donut: THIS IS INSANE. THIS IS JUST LIKE THE "TREASURE OF SERENA MADRE" EPISODE OF *GOSSIP GIRL*!

Mordecai: In what way?

Donut: EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING AT ONCE, MORDECAI!

WE ALL PULLED TO A STOP AT THE SAFEROOM ENTRANCE, WHICH WAS ONE we'd never used before. It was an ash-covered espresso stand just sitting in the middle of nowhere in the former Reaver territory, surrounded by landmine and now-inert summon traps, which I quickly gathered. The entrance itself was actually buried in dirt—probably as a temporary measure by the Reavers—and the strippers and Holger went to work digging it out. We'd have to do it manually, lest we damage the door. “Dong, keep trucking toward the other saferoom entrance with Gonk. We really need to get you a pet carrier if you want to keep that thing.”

“I have an extra I am quite willing to lend,” a new voice said. I whirled to see Prepotente had just landed by us. Bianca crunched on the grass, her flames causing the ash to flicker and fly away from her steps like little fireflies.

“Hi Prepotente!” Donut called from the back of Mongo, who also screeched.

Gonk gave a snort and approached the hellspawn familiar, who clicked and chittered back at the yak.

“Uh, hey Na,” Elle said, looking up. “How you feeling, hon?”

I looked up to see Li Na floating there about twenty feet off the ground. Ethereal chains swirled about her like wings. She had a black and purple glow about her, not unlike Bianca.

The flying thing was new. She remained floating there, arms crossed.

She had a health bar over her that was about $\frac{3}{4}$'s full.

She did not answer Elle.

"Good talk," Elle said.

Prepotente handed off a mount-specific carrier to Dong, who thanked him profusely.

"Yes, yes, I know nothing is ever free," Dong muttered to the sock over his shoulder. "But... No. No. You're right."

Li Na was glaring down at Louis, and I had a sudden, foreboding feeling. If they'd managed to hunt down the missing people whom she'd also marked, that meant there was only one mark left. The one inside Louis.

Next to me, Bigs let out a strangely dog-like growl when she looked up at Li Na.

"She's not a bad guy," I said. "She's just going through some shit. Her brother died."

"No, she's a bad guy," Bigs said. "You know what she did to Sneaky Tyler C?"

"Uh..." I said. I was assuming Tyler C was another sluggalo. "No?"

"She tied a potion to him and then ordered him to run right into the god. He blew up the moment he touched the thing. That's what I heard. It was a bitch-ass move. I don't like her."

"Huh," I said. I turned to Prepotente. "Did you find the other people she marked?"

"No, unfortunately we did not." Prepotente said, looking up at the crawler who continued to float there in creepy, angry silence. "There were 18 of them originally, and three survived long enough to get away. After some investigation, we now know who they were and where they are now. It is not good news for Li Na, I'm afraid. They are back on the 18th floor."

"The 18th floor?" Imani asked, coming to stand beside me. "How?"

Prepotente took out another potion vial and drank it down. It seemed to me he was drinking way more of these than his daily allotment. That was strangely sad to me.

He continued. "Apparently when that savage orc leader, King Rust, came into the dungeon, he brought his bevy of courtesans in with him. His harem. They were of several different races, and his deal, which he brokered individually with the AI, allowed them to enter as non-combatants

who were unable to be conscripted. They had been in hiding since the death of Rust.”

“Oh *shit*,” Elle said. “I told you, Imani, didn’t I? I thought I saw a goddamn naga in that chaos after the ball broke.”

“He was having sex with a naga?” Donut asked. “How did *that* work? Can you imagine the dirty talk? ‘Rub your naughty tusks all over my scaly cloaca, my warthog king.’ It’s obscene!”

Prepotente grunted. “Oh, it really is quite filthy. One of the harem girls was one of those tripods, like the adjutant for the Dream. It would be like having sexual congress with the Sputnik satellite!”

“Pony. Focus!” Elle snapped.

Prepotente screamed.

“God fucking damnit, goat boy,” Elle said.

But he held up his hand and continued. “Yes, anyway the harem women were pulled into the ball, but they were not captured as enemies by Donut’s *War Crime* spell. They were still considered outworlders, hence why Li Na was allowed to mark them. But when the *Battle Formation* spell was dispelled, they fled into Larracos. In the chaos, several were killed. But three managed to make it to the Desperado Club. According to the crocodilian woman at the entrance, they headed straight to the Cosmic Lounge, which apparently allows them to return to the 18th floor. They are gone, and they are forever out of Li Na’s reach. She now has a condition that will never allow her to heal. Luckily for her, her health is still several times that of all of us combined. But she will need to be very careful, despite her massively increased stats.”

Donut: I TOLD YOU THE RING WAS BAD NEWS, CARL.

I didn’t answer. I was just relieved she didn’t have a reason to kill Louis. I nodded up at her, and I continued toward the now-open saferoom. But before I went inside, I was stopped by a hand on my shoulder. It was Tipid.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Carl? Can you tell me something?”

“What’s up, man? We’re in a hurry.”

“Yeah, so... Who the fuck are you? And where the hell are we?”

“He got his brain scrambled during his crawl, and once he left the enhancement zone, his brain went to mush,” Rosetta said as we rushed Louis to the tent where Bucket Boy, Edgar, and the rest of the healers were waiting. “He had to go into debt to the Viceroy to fix it. It appears his repairs got ruined in that blast. The last thing he remembers is it being his last day as a game guide.”

“Wasn’t that like a bajillion years ago?” Donut asked.

Tipid was just sitting there, looking at his hands.

“What can we do for him?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rosetta said. “He’s actually okay as long as he stays in the dungeon. But if he leaves...”

He looked up at us. “I thought I was done. I thought I was going home. I lost my key.”

“Comrade,” Rosetta said, going to sit with him. “Let me tell you a story about the bravest Crest I have ever met.”

We left her there as we continued to the tent. Juice Box had the still-unconscious Louis over her shoulder. We were pretty certain Tagg didn’t have control of him, but we didn’t want to risk it. Samantha was hovering over him, talking animatedly like nothing was wrong.

All around, dozens of soldiers and former crawlers remained at work, repairing the towers and clearing the streets. A group of Semeru had gathered the pieces of that statue from the front of the Larracos castle and appeared to be trying to piece it back together.

Up on the third ring, across from the gash left by the still-idling dwarven digger, floated Milk. She was speaking to a very large group of crawlers, who were all gathered around her like she was giving them a lecture.

“What’s going on there?” I asked, pointing.

But before anyone could answer, we were all stopped dead as an ear-splitting scream echoed from the hospital tent.

This was followed by a worried screech from the giant allosaurus on the other side of the clearing. Big Tina. She saw Mongo and started bouncing up and down. Several of the kids were there as well, along with Kibben the high elf stablemaster all trying to calm down the massive dinosaur. Mordecai was out as well, likely driven outside because the children had all wanted to come. He started to move toward us.

“Mommy! Mom-mommy!” Big Tina shouted.

“No, Mongo,” Donut said as he started to rush toward her. “No. Your baby mama is asking for you.”

We moved into the medical tent, which was filled with people.

“Breathe!” Florin cried, holding the hand of the panting Kiwi, who was on her back. Bucket Boy stood between her legs, looking ill. Britney was in the room also, rubbing the bear’s head with a wet cloth.

Edgar was on the floor, dragging a pail of bloody water away with his mouth. Imani rushed forward to assist as Samantha zoomed up, pushing Imani out of the way to peer between Kiwi’s legs.

“It’s hairy!” Samantha announced. She still was nothing but a scorched ball, and her presence filled the tent with the scent of burnt plastic. “I can see it! It’s super hairy!” She paused. “Ewwww. It’s really gross. Kiwi, I’ll let you know if it comes out ugly!”

“Get out of the way,” Imani said, pushing Samantha aside.

“Mongo!” Kiwi cried. “Mongo, come here.”

Mongo let out a confused peep.

Donut gave me a look, and I shrugged. She hopped from Mongo’s back to my shoulder. I had to refrain from letting out an *oof*. “Uh, it’s okay Mongo. Go to Kiwi. Just come back if it gets weird.”

“If it *gets* weird?” Elle asked.

Mongo hesitantly stepped forward as Imani started casting soothing spells on Kiwi, who continued to pant. “Oh god, here comes another one. Ahhhhhh!”

Kiwi put her hand on Mongo’s side.

From the floor, Edgar said, “In ursine culture, they believe the father’s presence at the birth lends his strength to the newborn. There’s nothing strange about her wanting him here. Mother is doing fine. It will be soon. Now let’s examine our other patient.”

Juice Box placed Louis on the cot next to Kiwi. She reached down and kissed him on the forehead. “We’ll get you settled, love,” she said to him, stroking his hair.

Mordecai was suddenly there, administering a potion. “This will keep him stable and rested until we’re ready for him. It basically puts him in a deeper sleep than he already is. I don’t know if it’ll keep Tagg in the dark, but I believe it will. There aren’t really receptors in the heart or lungs.” He moved away to go check on the kids outside.

“You really love him,” I said to Juice Box. “I gotta admit, it seems so... strange.”

Juice Box looked at me, smiling sadly. “The first time I was with him, he had me change to a blue female to mimic some mythological hero from your culture. A woman changeling, actually. I took on the form of a creature called a Dewi, who can look into the hearts of men. I wasn’t expecting it, but he is so genuine, so pure, and I have never seen anything like it.” She brushed his hair away from his eyes and sighed. “There is so much chaos and death in this world, and I needed an anchor. I just, I don’t know. When you see someone like that, and it is so free of the rot of cynicism, so free of corruption, it’s like the most alluring, beautiful thing in the world. I have seen so much, and I’ve never had anyone like him. Someone who clings so hard to every drop of happiness he can find, even when there is so little. And when I knew he was coming to meet me on the floor, the thought of seeing him again kept me from truly falling into the darkness.” She looked up at me, eyes wet. “He is to me like Donut is to you.”

Donut remained on my shoulder, but she was ignoring this conversation. She was turned backward, shouting support at Kiwi. “You can do it!”

“Push!” Imani called as Kiwi screamed again. Mongo squealed in concern. “Push!”

“I wish I hadn’t taken on the form of that hunter wraith,” Juice Box continued. “It was worth it to save him, but I wish I hadn’t.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Have you ever heard of the concept of the Inevitable Ruin?” Juice Box asked.

The Inevitable Ruin.

I knew that phrase. I’d never read it, and I didn’t know where I’d heard it from, but I knew it. It didn’t appear anywhere in the cookbook that I could remember, but I knew I’d had to have heard it somewhere because the idea was burned into my bones.

Do you remember the circus?

“I’ve heard of the concept, yes. It’s the moment you recognize something is a lost cause, and anything you do past that point doesn’t matter because you can’t change the outcome.”

She nodded. “It’s also a spell. Or rather, it’s a curse, inflicted upon the mind of the Hunter Wraith, which is why they are so bitter. When they possess someone, it ruins something pure. It doesn’t change whatever it is.

It just tells you the truth. It's difficult to explain, and it manifests itself in different ways. But for me, when I had Louis possessed in order to save him, the curse showed me the truth. And the truth is that he's terrified of me. The truth is he's not in love with me. He thinks he has a special ability that causes NPCs to fall in love with him. A special ability that he was asked about when he was interviewed earlier today. It doesn't matter that it's not true. He doesn't trust what I feel, and he never will."

She continued to stroke his hair.

"For me, he was a safe harbor in this storm. For him, I've been nothing but a confusing burden. It's heartbreaking." She paused and took a breath. "I have something inside me, Carl. Something very, very powerful, and I've been afraid of it for a long time. But the thought of using it, *really* using it has been unthinkable because there are people like him out there."

"Almost there! Almost there!" Imani cried. "Bucket Boy, if you're going to vomit, do it outside!"

"We all have monsters inside of us, Juice Box. All of us. I have a literal monster inside of me. Louis, too."

"He does. He doesn't need another one in his life. That will now be my anchor, keeping him safe from afar if we manage to save him today. Just the knowledge that there's people like him is enough to temper the darkness."

I thought of Donut, leaned over the parapet of the Nest tower. Of Li Na the moment she marked all those people. Of Katia, and that moment when she killed Astrid. Or earlier, perhaps, the moment when she was told what couldn't be.

I thought of myself, sitting in that gas station next to Lightning Lou, pressing a button that would change everything.

These were the moments we couldn't take back. But did that truly mean there was nothing we could do to change our own fates?

"That concept, that curse is bullshit," I finally said. "It's hopelessness, just in another form. Nothing is hopeless. Not until we're truly dead."

A baby's cry filled the room.

"There's a second one coming!" Imani shouted.

"What is it! Is it ugly?" Samantha shouted.

A second cry filled the tent as Mongo squawked in confusion and fear and perhaps a tiny bit of joy.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Donut called from my shoulder. "Mongo... Mongo... you're a daddy!"

“My babies!” Kiwi said. “Give me my babies!”

I reached over and put my hand on Juice Box’s shoulder. “You’re right. We are the same. That’s why we need to keep working together. Nothing is hopeless.”

She turned to me, and she grinned. “You misunderstand me, cowboy. Am I sad about Louis? Of course. But am I hopeless? Not even close. In fact, I think I might have a little more in my tank than you do right now. Just wait until you see what Justice Light has cooked up.”

“Oh my god, they’re so adorable!” Donut cried. “Congratulations, Kiwi!”

“Looks like they’re both girls,” Imani said.

“Yay!” Samantha said. “They’re not ugly!”

“Congratulations, mama.” Florin coughed. “They’re, uh, amazing.”

I finally looked at the babies curled on the chest of Kiwi. Kiwi, old, scarred, and tired. The mother with a single eyepatch looked down at her two newborns with a loving eye as the twins continued to cry.

“It is kind of an... eclectic form,” Donut muttered. “But I guess it’s better than them being boring. But aren’t they adorable, Carl?”

“Err,” I said, exchanging a look with Elle who had a look of horror on her face.

They weren’t bears. They weren’t raptors. They were something in-between. It was still a little early to tell what they were going to really look like.

They were cute, I supposed. Kind of in the same way Mongo was cute when he was a baby. Meaning, they weren’t even a little cute. They were goddamn abominations, but I wasn’t about to say that out loud, not with half the room fawning over them, including their mother and Donut.

“Oh my god, with all the war stuff happening, we never had a baby shower!” Donut cried. “If we’re really going to spend the next week rebuilding this town, then we simply must have a shower right away!”

The creatures looked a little like the owlbear monsters from Dungeons and Dragons, but not quite. They had four legs, and they had the little stubs of wings as well. They were covered in a generous crop of wet, brown fur. But the heads of both of them had distinctly Mongo-like features, despite there being no feathers at all.

Their eyes, however, were bulbous and pug-like, rotating in their sockets and not focusing. And they weren’t exactly even with each other.

The baby on the left had one eye that was almost twice the size of the other. Their eyes made Rend's eyes look completely normal. It was... unsettling. Like a science experiment gone horrifically wrong.

"Can I have one?" Samantha demanded. "Carl accidentally blew up my robot dog Buster, but this is so much better. Mongo, I had no idea you'd make such adorable babies!"

They had beaks, but the noise they made was distinctly mammal-like. In fact, it was almost human-like, which was even worse.

Newborn Ursensus. Female. Level 0.

Legendary Creature.

I just love it when I'm allowed to create new monsters within the confines of the game rules. Part raptor, part bear, part Scolopendra magic. All adorable. These fuzzy little meat-eaters are going to be quite the handful when they grow up.

Because of this mob's intelligence level they cannot be used as pets.

Donut gasped with delight. "Mongo, you made a legendary creature!"

Elle: Okay, am I the only one completely freaked out by these little trash goblins? Holy shit, guys.

Florin: If we were back home, we'd be drowning them both in the bath right about now.

Imani: Not a word, either of you. Not a word.

Mongo stood nearby, waving his wings as if he didn't know what to do. I patted him on the back.

"If I had a cigar, I'd give it to you, buddy."

“OKAY EVERYONE. WE HAVE ABOUT AN HOUR LEFT TO FIGURE OUT THE issue with Louis before the soldiers take the Dream castle,” Edgar said as they wheeled out Kiwi and her new babies. He stood upon another bed so he was even with Louis. “Let’s work the problem. Juice Box, can you tell if the presence is in a specific place?”

“No,” Juice Box said, pulling her hand away. “It’s very, very strange. I can sense the lungs and the heart. I can feel Tagg there. They are a symbiote, in a way. We can rip open his chest and take his heart and lungs, but no healing potion will fix that. He would instantly die. And the moment we move in, I fear the presence in him would react.”

Samantha had left the room but was now back, hovering over all of us. She’d rushed outside, but when she returned, she seemed a little upset and hadn’t said anything.

“Okay,” Edgar said. “Anybody have any ideas?”

Victory and Fopsy both appeared in the room with a *crack*.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“In a virtual meeting of the Syndicate Council,” Victory said. “We’re only back because the AI was throwing a fit about us missing all this. They’ve just called a No Confidence vote on Glory, and that’s happening right now. There’s a bit of an upheaval out there. People are suddenly accusing everyone else of secretly being agents for the Reavers.”

“Is he?” I asked. “You know what, nevermind. I don’t give a shit.”

“He’s not as far as I’m aware,” Victory said, ignoring my statement that I didn’t care. “What’s more interesting is the possibility that the Dream are all Reavers.”

“They’re not,” Juice Box said.

She nodded. “But the fact Tagg decided to secretly start moving toward the post physical form path is interesting. I could see why he’d keep any association with the Reavers a secret. They’re two of the largest consumer-goods manufacturers in the galaxy. The Dream provide food, and the Reavers build just about everything else. An alliance would be a mega-monopoly, and the only reason why the Reavers don’t have a foothold in food production is that people don’t trust them with it. The Dream is hardly better with their food licensing agreements, but people don’t have to worry about being shepherded toward singularity. And even more interesting is that Glory apparently knew. The Dream and the Syndicate security just started shooting at everyone for no apparent reason, and we have spacecraft crash-landing all over the Earth’s surface right now.”

Victory thumbed over her shoulder at Fopsy. “And if the vote goes a certain way, this guy here might actually be the Prime Minister again, which is doubly interesting because he’s the Dream’s adjutant. You’d think he’d know if his client was a robot.”

“I had no idea,” Fopsy said. “No inkling whatsoever, but it does make sense now considering some clues.”

“Guys,” I said. “Again. I don’t give a shit. I just want to help Louis.”

Victory nodded. “As far as rules are concerned, Tagg will still be killed the moment Team Retribution takes that castle. Whether those organs keep working in General Louis is really up to Tagg.”

“Is there any path of negotiation where he can surrender and survive?” I asked.

Victory shrugged. “The rules are pretty clear. If he’s not on the floor anymore, he will forfeit and still live. But unfortunately, the crawl rules supersede, and his host can’t leave the floor. Louis can’t leave.”

Damnit, I thought. “Can he abdicate? Team Retribution had about 200 crawlers as soldiers, and they were able to leave and join us.”

Victory shook her head. “No. He’s literally the only one left, and he’s the warlord.”

“So it’s impossible,” I said.

“It appears that way, yes,” Victory said.

I sighed, turning my attention back to Louis.

We had his jacket open and his shirt up, revealing his bare, pale chest. He'd been completely split open, but the scar was gone. His Donut Holes shirt was still there, and because it was magical it wouldn't break. But it was now stained with blood.

"I can fix him," Samantha said.

"Let's talk to the elf again," I said to the group. "See if he has any ideas or demands."

Warlord Carl: Okay, Tagg. Tell us what you want.

Epitome Tagg: It's quite simple, Carl. Get me to the 18th Floor. I will have a new body grown for me, and we will grow replacement organs for your friend here, and we will do a swap. He will be out of the dungeon, and I will be back in control. We both get what we want.

Warlord Carl: We can't do that. Not with that action item that will force you to die once we take your castle. I just confirmed this with both my adjutant and yours. And as much as I love Louis, you have to know I'm not willing to kill everyone else in order to save him.

Epitome Tagg: We'll have to finish the procedure at the Reaver castle. Fang was being an ass and wasn't going to allow the brain implant until he, too, was free. We will keep your friend's brain intact, and it can be reimplanted. Once that happens, I will have control, and he will cease to be a crawler. Not if his brain is physically out of his body. We know what you're planning on doing with the NPC team. With the *Zerzura* spell, which will take the city of Larracos to the 12th floor. I will go with them.

I paused at that, and I exchanged a look with Donut. The guy truly was in the dark. He had no idea the castle had been nuked and even if we wanted to go with that crazy plan, it was now impossible.

I was hoping he'd have an actual, viable way to get Louis out.

"Fuck," I said. "Mordecai, is there a way to knock his ass out so he's, like, asleep when the timer expires on his castle?"

"I don't think so. If he's out or disabled, the lungs and heart stop. Again, maybe we can kick start the organs if Tagg dies. *Maybe*. It depends on how the system decides to kill him. But he clearly has access to his warlord page meaning he sees how much time he has left. He will take Louis out with him."

“Doesn’t he still own the *Vengeance of the Daughter* show?” Donut asked. “Maybe we can get...”

“No,” Victory said, interrupting her. “He has no outside communications anymore. That was your doing, if you recall.”

“I have an idea,” Samantha said.

“We need to stall him. Make him think we’re going along,” I said.

Warlord Carl: Okay, Tagg. We’ll take you to the castle. But I want assurances you’ll keep your end of the bargain with Louis.

Epitome Tagg: I want a show of good faith. Remove the Team Retribution soldiers from my throne room.

Warlord Carl: Let’s see if I can convince her.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m still waiting for ideas, folks.”

Samantha flew right up to me and bit me on the nose.

“Ow! What the fuck, Samantha!”

“Carl,” she said, sounding serious and morose. “I think my child is dead. I think she died in the acid. I felt her, and now I don’t feel her anymore, and it is my fault. I should have gone to save her sooner, but I did not. I was too caught up in my own lust and anger, and now I have lost my only child. I have failed as a mother.”

“Uh,” I said. “I’m... I’m sorry about that? Are you sure she was actually down here?”

She shook her head sadly. “She was here, and I felt her, but now she’s gone. It’s actually Tish’s fault, I’m quite certain, which is why after this is done I am going to plant the nuke I stole from Buster up at the college. But that’s not the important part here. The important part here is that I know how to save Louis.”

“Goddamnit, Samantha,” I said. “You have a nuke up your neck hole?” I actually had one, too, still attached to one of the dogs. But I wasn’t about to tell her I had one of the dangerous robots. “You will not be nuking anyone. Tell us your plan on saving Louis.”

Samantha sniffed. “The flesh golem body you have in your inventory. Of Princess Lunette. She has a good heart and lungs. If you swap them out fast enough, you can save Louis.”

“Holy jeepers,” Mordecai said. “That’s... that’s actually a great idea.”

“Of course!” Edgar said. “That was originally my tattoo. I had forgotten she’d turned it into an incomplete flesh golem.”

“It won’t work outside the dungeon,” Victory warned. “Louis will need to make a pretty expensive deal to survive, but if the alternative is death.” She let it hang.

“But it’ll work?” I asked. “Isn’t a heart transplant a super-complicated procedure?”

“How is Samantha a floating head, but Louis can’t live with stupid lungs and a heart?” Donut demanded. “This is so inconsistent!”

Mordecai turned to Juice Box. “Do you really have a Fleshmancer form?”

She immediately changed to a tall, dark-skinned humanoid figure. A male figure. “We will need powerful healing potions and a chest spreader,” she said, her voice now deep.

“I still have a Mordecai’s Special Brew on me,” Donut said.

“Wait.” I held up a hand. I turned to the sex doll head. “Samantha, I’m sorry about your daughter. Maybe she’s not really gone.” I had a sudden thought. What was it that War Mage had said? They’d found and taken the Scavenger’s Daughter. Could that possibly be *Samantha’s* daughter? And if so, did that mean Samantha was really the scavenger? I still didn’t know who that was. I really needed to sit down and figure all this out. But for right now, we needed to save Louis. “If we do this, that means you won’t get your body back. At least not for a while.”

She nodded solemnly. “I know. It’s okay. Louis deserves it more than I do.”

I patted her on the head. She was still burned to a crisp, and little flakes of crap fell off her.

“That’s... very brave and strong of you. That makes you a hero, Samantha. And I’m very proud of you.”

She sniffed. “I don’t always mess things up, right? I’d like to think maybe I can be a good influence sometimes and not someone who ruins everything, which is what King Blaine said to me and what my father said to me and what my mother said to me before they all cast me out.” She blinked up at me and Donut, who’d returned to my shoulder. “I used her, my daughter, to get what I wanted. I ruined everything.”

“It’s okay to be a work in progress,” Donut said. “Thank you for helping to save Louis.”

She nodded. “I may be a neglectful mother. I may have had an indirect, possibly direct hand in the death of Geyrun, but a girl can find forgiveness,

right?”

I sighed.

“You did not just fucking say that out loud.”

“What?”

System Message: Emberus has entered the realm.

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66 MINUTES UNTIL THE DESTRUCTION OF THE 9TH FLOOR.

“Fuck,” I said, jumping to my feet. “Fuck, fuck, fuck! Guys, change of plans!”

Quest Update: Find Out Who Killed My Son.

This so-called Psamathe claims she was part of my son’s death. Capture her for me, and I will personally handle the interrogation. Once I have finished *grilling* her, I will cleanse this world in fire to remove the stink of this murderer’s presence.

If she is not within my presence in 66 minutes, this world will be destroyed in fire and lava and wrath.

Fly, martyr. Bring my enemy to me.

Nobody had yet reacted.

“We’re doing this. We’re doing it now!” I shouted.

“What? What?” Donut asked.

Even though Emberus was clearly on the other side of the map, it was already getting warmer.

“Wow. I wouldn’t have opened my heart if I’d known you were going to be all dramatic about this,” Samantha said.

Tran: Uh, guys? There’s a new, very, very large and pissed-off looking god in the distance.

Tran was still out in the field, guarding the remains of the Dream castle.

New Quest. This is How the Gristle Grinds.

This is a team quest. All crawlers and all active combatants of the Princess Posse will receive this quest.

There is no host to this quest. Nobody can opt out of this quest.

Ha! And you thought these quest things went by the wayside on this floor. Sorry to disappoint you, you soon-to-be toasty bitches!

Here's the problem. A very angry god that many of you are familiar with has just entered the realm. His name is Emberus. His son, Geyrun, was murdered. It's a big mystery that probably isn't going to be solved today, even if any of you bastards do survive this. But a demigod named "Samantha" has just admitted to having taken part in the crime. Emberus, being the loving father he is, has come to the realm to question this demigod. Regardless of what Samantha says to him, Emberus is going to turn the entirety of the 9th floor into a cremation chamber.

This will happen in at least 66 minutes, but your cremation may be delayed slightly if Samantha actually shows up to the interrogation.

Regardless, everything and everybody on this floor is going to die. This is not something that can be stopped.

That is, unless you manage to kill Emberus, which as we all know is possible, but unlikely.

So here's the quest part. You need to win faction wars. You gotta do it fast. And once you do that, get the hell out of there before the world goes up in flames.

This event supersedes any other events, but Faction Wars rules are still in effect.

***Reward:* All survivors will be given one year off their indentureship contracts should they accept a deal upon the next floor. This is good for the first negotiation only. Also, all food boxes will be upgraded with the "extra toasty" option.**

"You know what, Carl," Elle said. "Sometime in the near future we need to sit down and do a solid positives and negatives analysis of letting you keep that pet sex doll of yours."

"Like you never accidentally triggered an apocalyptic event, Elle," Samantha muttered.

Carl: Everyone haul ass back to the city. This is not a drill. We're doing this. T-minus 65 minutes until level collapse!

Tran: Are you fucking kidding me?

Carl: Get back here now.

“Katia!” I called. The orchid in her inventory took exactly 60 minutes to work.

We had 65 minutes. “Eat the orchid. You have to do it now. Now, now, now!”

“But...” she began.

“Carl, we haven’t had the chance to say goodbye to her!” Donut cried. “I thought we had days left!”

The moment Katia took the orchid, she would be rendered unconscious for an hour. And afterward, the goddess would appear.

Katia looked panicked. “I haven’t transferred all my inventory away yet!”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I said. I grabbed her hands. “You have to eat it. Now.”

“But I have stuff in the safe room that I *really* need...”

“This isn’t goodbye,” I said, taking a moment to put my forehead against hers. “This is how we win. Remember the plan. This is *your* plan. You already gave Donut the stuff, right?”

“I did, but...” She seemed to resign herself. “Remember how I said you were going to Carl it up?”

“Yeah, this one is on Samantha,” I said. “Now eat the orchid.”

“I love you,” Katia said. She raised her voice. “I love all of you.”

Warlord Carl: If you are not in Larracos, get your asses in here now.

Justice Light: Tell me what is happening!

Carl: In 65 minutes, Emberus will melt this entire floor.

Justice Light: Oh. Is that all?

Carl: Set your trap or whatever the hell you’re doing and get to Larracos.

Justice Light: The trap is already turned on. It has been turned on for days now.

Carl: Good. Now get here!

I whirled, pointing at Juice Box and Mordecai. “You guys. Do Louis. Now. We can’t leave if we haven’t actually won. How long will it take?”

“Thirty minutes,” Mordecai said.

“Then get moving. Juice Box. Get your people to safety.”

She nodded.

System Message: Forces from Team Retribution have abandoned the throne room of the Dream.

To Victory, I said. “The moment we win, how long before the stairwells appear?”

“Immediately.”

“Actually, it’s about ten seconds,” Fopsy replied.

“And where do the stairwells appear? Here in the funnel?”

“I can’t tell you that, Carl,” Victory said.

“It’s here,” Rosetta said, striding into the tent, followed closely by a bewildered looking Tipid. “There will be several right here in a ring around where the castle currently is. The moment Factions Wars is won, the 72 hours countdown appears for level collapse and the stairwells generate.”

Imani grabbed my shoulders. “We don’t have enough time! Carl, it’s 60 minutes for her to be unconscious. The actual ceremony is probably going to take another ten.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m gonna have to stall a little bit. Samantha, don’t go far!”

“Wait,” Bautista said. “We are not prepared! I need... I thought...”

“Eat the fucking orchid,” I cried at Katia.

“Okay, okay, I’m doing it,” Katia said, pulling herself up onto the same table Kiwi had just given birth upon.

“No,” Donut cried. “No, I need to say goodbye properly!” Donut leapt to the table, but by the time she landed, Katia was already out. She was knocked out, and her health was down to 1%. She had **Waiting for the Goddess** over her head.

“No,” Donut said.

System Message: The Orchid of Eileithyia has been consumed. The goddess has been summoned.

Huanxin Jinx would get here two minutes before Emberus would melt this world. Not enough time.

“I didn’t...” Donut said from her spot next to Katia. “Carl, I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

I took a breath, and I put my hand on her. “It’s okay. We still have the ceremony itself after she wakes up. Like Imani says, it’ll take a little bit.”

“But if it takes time, how are we going to do it? And what if the Huanxin Jinx lady makes it last long on purpose? She just wants Katia and

doesn't care about the rest of us."

Donut wouldn't be able to leave until after Katia was whisked away. That was the price of the Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

I eyed Samantha just hovering there, looking petulant. I looked in my inventory, and I moved the Samantha head-chucker attachment for my xistera to my hotlist.

"We'll have to wait until the last minute, and then we'll give Emberus what he wants. Hopefully that'll give us enough time. But before that, we should have enough time to get everybody else out as long as this Louis surgery goes well. It'll just be you, me, and Katia. That way we'll know everybody else is safe."

Elle buzzed up and crossed her arms. "If you think you're going to hog Katia's last moments all to yourself, you're crazy."

"Guys," I said. "It's going to be dangerous as fuck. Priority is making sure most everyone else is safe."

"Carl," Donut said. "If you're planning on using your head thrower thing, you won't be able to take it off. Not if Emberus picks Samantha up. It'll just summon the god to you, and we'll both get burned to nothing. Remember when he was outside Tserendolgor's bubble? He melted the entire world!"

"It's okay," I said. "One problem at a time."

"Okay, everybody shut up," Mordecai called. "We need to free Louis. Carl, we need that flesh golem."

I grabbed another cot, and I pulled it next to Louis. I dumped the body of Princess Lunette on the cot next to him.

This was the body that was supposed to eventually house Samantha. It had been given to me by Signet in the last moments of the Butcher's Masquerade. Princess Lunette. Signet's mother. She'd originally been a tattoo, etched onto Signet soon after Edgar had found the young, alone half-naïad after her mother's death at the hand of the high elves.

The body was that of a slight, beautiful naïad. The moment the body appeared, I saw the problem.

"Uh," I began. "Guys, she has gills. She's a full naïad. Doesn't that mean she's water only?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "That's okay. You have that rebreather in your inventory. Give it to me."

“What?” I asked. I dug into my inventory, and I found it. It was tiny, the size of a large bracelet. It was the kua-tin rebreather I’d taken from Loita’s body after I’d assassinated her. “It’s too small!”

“Not where we’re going to put it,” Edgar said. “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. Mordecai is going to cut him open, and once we do, Donut will administer a fine healing potion. While that is happening, I will need two people to hold open his chest. Carl and Bautista... Daniel, where did you go?” We looked about, but Bautista was gone, having fled the tent. “Trepid, you hold the other side open. In the meantime, Imani and Rosetta, you will open up Princess Lunette and expose the heart and pulmonary system. Her lungs are different than human lungs, so be careful when you cut. Keep her open, and when we’re ready, I will instruct you on how to quickly extract it. Once it’s ready to be transplanted into Louis, we’ll administer the special brew potion. We’ll have 30 seconds. We’ll quickly remove the existing heart and lungs and replace it with the naiad organs. Juice Box will activate it, and then we’ll do the graft. That’ll be the crucial part, at the end. We’ll have 30 seconds, and that’s it.”

“Okay folks,” Mordecai said. “Let’s do it.” He looked up in the air. “This probably should go without saying, but what I’m about to do is a surgical procedure and is allowed under the non-combatant code. The second party in this is an empty shell.”

He took a knife, and he started to cut down the center of Louis’s chest.

Warlord Tagg: What is happening. What are you doing? I swear I will kill him.

We were almost ready for the part where we were going to extract the heart and lungs. They were mostly electronic, looking more like the internals of a machine than an actual heart and lungs, making it easy to see where Tagg ended and Louis began. But strands of red, pulsing flesh were interwoven in the plastic-like organs.

“Shit,” I said as I held the exposed, open bones of Louis’s chest. “Tagg is freaking out.”

“We just need two more minutes,” Mordecai said. They were setting up a group of about thirty different lines that would cut all at once, bringing the

entire system out in one piece. “Distract him! We can’t have him shutting down now!”

The heat had become sweltering. Emberus occasionally bellowed in the distance, calling for Samantha. Outside, the sound of rapid, last-minute preparations continued unabated.

“I got it,” Donut said. She stood over Louis’s open chest on a high chair, ready to drop Mordecai’s Special Brew. Behind her, Katia remained in her coma.

WARLORD DONUT: WE’RE ALMOST THERE TO THE CASTLE. SO WHAT’S YOUR PLAN ANYWAY? TO TAKE OVER THE BODY OF LOUIS? HOW ARE YOU GOING TO LOOK YOUR MOTHER IN THE EYE KNOWING YOU HAD SEX WITH HER?

Epitome Tagg: Quit saying that! That disgusting human never had sex with my mother! He besmirched my mother’s name with a changeling who took her form!

WARLORD DONUT: YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK HAPPENED? I THINK YOUR MOM WAS REALLY FLATTERED THAT LOUIS THOUGHT SHE WAS SEXY, AND THAT MADE YOU MAD. AND YOU’RE AFRAID THAT SHE’S GOING TO WANT LOUIS IN REAL LIFE, AND IF YOU LOOK LIKE HIM, WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN?

Epitome Tagg: So help me gods, I will end him right now.

EPITOME TAGG’S SEXY MOTHER: “I CAN’T WAIT FOR YOU TO COME BACK TO ME, LOUIS. MY HAND IS STUCK IN THE WASHING MACHINE. WILL YOU COME HELP ME?”

Epitome Tagg: Change your name back this instant! I will kill this fat loser right now! Right fucking now! You puerile, disgusting mongrel. How dare you? How fucking dare you? I will starve out all of your kind!

EPITOME TAGG’S SEXY MOTHER: HOW DARE *ME*? HOW DARE *YOU* INSULT ME LIKE THAT? ON THIS, THE DAY OF MY GRANDCHILD’S BIRTH? YOU DARE? DO YOU KNOW WHAT LEVEL I AM?

Epitome Tagg: CHANGE THAT NAME NOW.

EPITOME TAGG’S SEXY MOTHER: UH, TIME OUT. IT’S TELLING ME I CAN’T DO ANY MORE NAME CHANGES UNTIL

TOMORROW. SERIOUSLY. I THINK I'M STUCK WITH THIS NAME NOW.

"He said stall, not piss him off," I cried.

"We're playing good cop, bad cop, Carl."

"That's not how that works!"

"He's too mad right now to do anything!" Donut said. "I must admit I stole that one insult joke at the end there from the internet. You posted something very similar on your Facebook page once. Well, Miss Beatrice posted it on your behalf."

"I know, Donut. And insults aren't as funny or as effective when you reuse or steal them."

"He's a bald CEO robot guy with both mommy and anger issues from another planet. It's not like he's going to know I'm lifting material, Carl."

I grunted with the effort of keeping Louis's ribcage spread open. The constant healing was fighting to close it. "That's okay. The whole thing was taken from the *Godfather* movie anyway."

"Thirty seconds!" Mordecai called. "Guys, are you ready with Lunette's organs?"

Behind us, the flesh golem was peeled up, tissues already extracted, held up in the air. It reminded me of the krasue demons from the third floor. Rosetta, Imani, and Elle all held up the dripping organs, placed in a small net like it was something they'd just pulled from the ocean.

"We're ready," Imani called.

Epitome Tagg: You know what? Fuck this. Fuck this existence. Fuck this life. And fuck all of you. You don't deserve singularity. None of you do.

"Heart has stopped," Edgar shouted.

"Shit, pull, pull!" Mordecai yelled. They weren't ready yet, and Mordecai couldn't be the one to remove the organs, lest it constitute an attack. But Bucket Boy yanked, pulling the organs out. The whole group, heart and lungs all popped out with a wet squelch. He threw the mess over his shoulder onto the ground with a splat.

"Potion!" Edgar cried as Donut poured Mordecai's Special Brew into Louis's open, gushing chest.

"Organs incoming!" Imani called as she placed them in his yawning chest cavity.

“Casting now,” Juice Box said, her male voice calm. Her hands flashed, and the transplanted organs began to squirm, the pieces whipping about like an octopus, seeking attachments.

Mordecai took the rebreather and made a slit in the bronchial, moving it into the flesh, quickly sewing, his hands flashing.

“Shit, is that going to work?” I asked.

“That’s how these things are actually designed,” Rosetta said. “Internal or external. He’s not going to like it, but it’ll work.”

Mordecai cast a *Water Breathing* scroll on Louis—we had to use the scroll version because he now had an extra-long potion cooldown—and as the gills formed, he quickly connected a few tubes from the new organs to the gills. Bucket Boy started quickly jamming something into the slits on his neck. This would keep them there after the water breathing ended.

Donut: DID YOU KNOW MORDECAI KNEW HOW TO DO THIS STUFF?

Carl: There’s still so much about all of them we don’t know.

“Done!” Mordecai shouted with 10 seconds left on the rapid healing. I raised my hands in the air, letting go of the rib cage. Tipid did the same, and the chest snapped closed like a mousetrap. As we watched and collectively held our breath, the chest sealed on its own. For several seconds, Louis remained pale. Then he coughed. He coughed, and water splashed from the gills on his neck. He coughed again, and then his eyes fluttered open.

“What?” Louis asked. He made a gagging noise, and then more water splashed from his new gills. Bucket Boy tentatively reached forward and started pulling out the stops he’d placed, holding the gills open. The gills remained.

“Louis,” Mordecai said. “Switch off the water breathing notification.”

“Uh, where am I?” he asked.

“Do it,” Mordecai said.

“I did already. I did when I woke up. But something’s wrong. I feel... I feel weird.”

“It worked,” Edgar announced, and we all started to clap.

Samantha zipped up. “We’re cousins now,” she said, and she kissed Louis on the lips.

“Wait, guys,” I said. “What happened to the lungs and heart?”

Mongo popped up and let out an angry screech. He had blood on his beak, and he spit out the chewed-to-hell plastic heart and lungs onto the

ground of the tent with disgust.

System Message: Warlord Epitome Tagg of the Dream has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given... Well, this one is just as complicated as the last one, but imma give it to pet Mongo of the Princess Posse. I almost called it a suicide, and I almost gave it to that Bucket Boy kid, but it's going to Mongo. Consider it a present for the baby shower.

System Message: The Dream has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Dream have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

System Message: And then there were two.

We had 32 minutes until the timer ran out.

“Well, that was significantly easier than I thought it would be,” Donut said.

“Sledge!” I called. I stuck my head out the tent. “Sledge! It's time!”

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21 MINUTES UNTIL THE DESTRUCTION OF THE 9TH FLOOR.

“Goodbye, Sledgie,” Donut said from the shoulder of the rock monster. “You were the best bodyguard anyone could ever have.”

The Sledge reached up, and he patted Donut on the head. “Maybe I see you again. Maybe I see Bomo. And you no need bodyguard anymore.”

“I will always need you, Sledgie,” she said, and she headbutted the rock monster. She jumped from him back to my shoulder.

“Starting to cast,” The Sledge said. It would take five minutes for the spell to work.

He glowed. He had cast *Zerzura*.

Rosetta: It worked. Shanty Town is included in the glow. It successfully combined the two towns. Moving to the saferoom now with Tipid and the others. I have Samantha.

The entire funnel city of Larracos—and Shanty Town—was about to get transferred to the 12th floor. To the Court of the Ascendency. According to Rosetta, most of the action took place in the actual halls, which were placed on a green, fertile hill overlooking miles and miles of fields of cotton.

There were some magical properties with this cotton field, but it was somewhere here where the city would land, and it would be where the NPCs would settle.

The rules for the gods were clear. The NPCs were untouchable until the Ascendency actually started. And in the meantime, with Juice Box's squad of changelings and their ability to change to basilica guards, they could hopefully keep the gods at bay should any rules change.

If the city happened to squish any mortals when it landed and—hopefully—drilled into the ground, it was going to cause some problems because those squished by the appearance of the city would turn into undead monsters called Children of Inpewt. That was something they'd have to deal with, but based on the sheer number of people we were sending down there, something told me it wasn't going to be a huge issue.

It wasn't safe, but it was life. And it was a way to make certain both teams would survive.

We actually weren't certain what was about to happen with some of the mercenaries. There were several kinds, and all were going to do something different. The hired ones, including the Sledge and the other surviving cretins, along with the for-hire, dungeon-born mercenaries for all the teams would simply disappear, possibly moved into "storage" for the next crawl, possibly tossed back into the mercenary market. They would not move to the 12th floor.

The changelings and all the thousands of NPCs who lived in Larracos plus the Semeru dwarves would move to the Ascendency. Anyone else who'd moved to this floor from the 6th would also move.

We weren't certain about the strippers or the sluggalos, and as a result, they would stay with us. They would go back to the safe room and move to the barracks there. We had limited capacity, but there were several crawlers who were planning on staying who could take some in.

Ferdinand would transfer to the 12th. Juice Box would, too. And with their transfer would come the defeat of Team Retribution and the victory for the Princess Posse.

And then there were the outworlders.

There were thousands upon thousands of these mercenaries in the city. People who had come here to fight both against us and for us. All of them would get transferred out of the dungeon the moment *Zerzura* triggered.

Over 50,000 former crawlers had come to help us. To fight by our side. Only about 28,000 were left. Just a little more than half. They had survived the dungeon, left, and they came back to die.

Once you enter the dungeon, you will die in the dungeon.

And of the 32,500 crawlers who made it from the eighth to the ninth, only 20,221 were left.

This is war, I thought. This is what happens in war.

Across the way, I watched Louis stumble from the hospital tent, holding his throat. Juice Box had her arm on his shoulder. She said something to him, and he said something back. She put her hands to her face, and she turned away. Louis just stood there, and he watched her go.

Thousands had died. Tens of thousands. But just over 20,000 crawlers making it to the 10th floor was a goddamned record. The second highest number wasn't even close.

Of those 20,000, most were going to take a deal. That was okay. They had fought long, and they had fought hard. They were done, and they deserved rest.

If we had our way. If we did this correctly, they would never have to come back.

Lucia Mar was here, sitting on the ground, sobbing. Florin, Jurgen, and Imani surrounded her, talking.

They were trying to convince her to take a deal. I hoped it would work.

And then there were the other mercenaries. Those from the armies we'd defeated. They milled about nervously, filling all the floors of Larracos, mostly lending a hand in the rapid construction.

They, too, would go home. They were done.

Well, not home. None of us were going home.

I gazed up at a group of them, staring down at me. The closest one was a gnoll mercenary. Corporal Pillbox. He nodded down at me. He'd been in Empress D'Nadia's employ, and yet, he'd managed to survive.

My initial instinct was to kill them. I could mark them like Li Na had, and I could kill them all, raising my stats to 300 across the board just like she had. I knew a lot of people following my progress would be enraged at me not doing exactly that. They would call me stupid. They would be disappointed in the lack of blood I shed, and they would angrily unfollow my feed because I was not the monster they hoped I would be.

Fuck you all, I thought. Fuck you all.

One look at Li Na, and I knew that path, that slope was too steep. Survival had more than one meaning.

Still, I didn't want to let it go. The Ring of Divine Suffering. There was so much possibility on this floor, and I'd squandered it. The hold was so great, it was overwhelming. What opportunities would the ring provide on the next floor, or the one after that?

The heavy weight of Donut on my shoulder was enough to remind me that strength and stats weren't everything. I pulled the ring from my inventory, and I held it up. I raised it high enough so it was right in front of Donut's nose.

"Are you sure, Carl?" Donut asked.

"I'm sure."

She reached forward, and she gave it a sniff. And then she took the ring into her mouth, and she swallowed it. She made a gagging noise, and I patted her on the head.

"I almost choked to death, Carl. That would've been quite ironic, don't you think?"

"Hey, Kitten," a voice said.

"Ferdinand. There you are!" Donut said.

Drick had appeared. Ferdinand sat on Drick's bald head, arms splayed over the adjutant's dome like he was a pillow. Ferdinand had his old, drained-of-magic turban back in his inventory, but he still wore the bowler hat. Donut had allowed him to keep it.

"Just wanted to say 'Yo' before I moseyed on down to the 12th floor to bang some hot goddess chicks."

Donut harrumphed. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, so if you wanted, you know, a last second fling, we have time."

"We have like four minutes, Ferdinand."

"That's more than enough time for me."

"Eww. Go away. You're disgusting."

"All right. I'll see you on the 12th floor then," the cat said. He hopped to the ground, and his hat fell off. He picked it up with his mouth.

"Oh, and Ferdinand?" Donut said.

The orange cat turned around. He gave a muffled response.

"Thanks for trying to come save me in the tower."

He spit the hat back out. "Anytime babe." He picked it up and strolled away.

Drick nodded at me.

“You going to the 18th floor after this?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m assuming so, yes.”

“Good luck.”

He grunted and walked away.

Milk approached, and she stood next to me.

She would not transfer to the 12th floor according to Mordecai. She would go back to her guild.

“I did it,” she said. “I fulfilled my contract. I still have to live out the season, but I can leave after this.” She grinned at me. “I am glad I was given the chance to cook one final meal.”

She raised her wing, pointing. Donut and I looked up. In the rings around us were thousands of crawlers, all looking down upon us. A sudden silence filled the city.

“Carl, Donut,” Milk announced, her voice suddenly, magically amplified. She’d etched a word on her own throat to make the magic happen. “These are the crawlers who have all decided that they want to take a deal as soon as we reach the next floor. These are also the former crawlers who will be going home. We have a present for you, and for all the brave souls who have decided to stay and fight on.”

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated.

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated with a metric fuckton of entries.

For fucks sake. Finally.

Your Book of Voodoo has been segmented into two volumes. The second volume is entitled *Carl’s Book of Boom*.

I pulled the second, heavy book from my inventory. Somewhere along the way, the book of Voodoo had magically changed since it now should have literally almost 30,000 pages. It still had about 500 pages, and when I flipped through it, it sort of zeroed in on the entry I was supposed to find. This second one was the same. I opened it to a random page.

Crawler Number 1,982,122 Asi Hamami Level 59 Fox Warrior.

Carl, thank you for helping us. I have lost so much, but I still have not lost my hope.

And below that was a drawing in red ink. It was a crude drawing of a lock and a key.

Consuming this page will give you a level 10 Lockpick skill for a period of five minutes.

Donut: CARL, CARL I GOT A BOOK CALLED A BANQUET FIT FOR A PRINCESS! IT'S FILLED WITH PICTURES AND NICE THINGS ABOUT ME! AND SPELLS!

Milk continued. "They're leaving the dungeon, so I taught them how to remove a skill or spell and paint it onto a page. They each did three. One for you, Carl. One for you, Donut, and one on their own entry page, which is now a first come, first served sort of deal in the original book of Voodoo that anyone can use. The one for you and Donut are personal for you. They permanently lose the skills when they transfer it to the book, and when you eat the page, you only gain it for a very short period of time, depending on the quality of the drawing. But each one should have a personal note attached, telling you how they are grateful that you have saved their lives." She paused and gave me a grin. "Oh, and they may have unloaded some of their gear. It's waiting in your guild for distribution. I told them not to give it *all* up because some of the deals they may take will require them to use their old equipment."

Donut trembled on my shoulder. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Hup! Hup! Hup!" the other crawlers started to chant, rising in din.

"And these guys," Milk said, her voice also rising in volume. "The former crawlers. They can't transfer their skills, but that's okay, don't you think? They already gave what they could. And some gave everything they had."

They all started throwing something over the edge of the railings down upon us. Flowers and streamers. These were the white and gold flowers from the plains, from before it all started. I didn't know where the colorful streamers had come from, but as they fell, they filled the broken city of Larracos with shining, colorful light, and it made it beautiful again.

"Goodbye everyone!" Donut called, turning in a circle, tears in her eyes as flowers and streamers fell around her. "Goodbye everyone! Thanks for helping us murder all the bad guys! And you, bad guys who are still here, I hope you go home and hug your children because you got really, really lucky!"

"They're not really going home," Milk whispered to me. "Apparently the embargo is still in place. Your warriors are headed back to *Homecoming Queen*. The other mercenaries, I don't know."

“That’s okay,” I said, waving. I met eyes again with Corporal Pillbox who was also crying. “If they do send them back in here, I think their masters will end up regretting it.”

“Goodbye, Carl,” Milk said. “If you can sneak back into Club Vanquisher, come say hello. But if not, that’s okay. You have given me something I didn’t think I had anymore. Burn it all to the ground.”

I gave my sister a hug.

Across the way, I caught sight of Tina hovering over her mother, who sat in a chair with the two babies nestled against her. Miss Nadine was there as well, clucking over the children. As was Holger, who had young Clint on his shoulders. Kiwi had decided to risk going to the 12th floor, along with all of the other children, who surrounded her. Bonnie and Skarn stood side-by-side, both looking tired and forlorn. Mongo and Rend—who would stay with us—were both there as well. Mongo was sniffing at the babies. Rend was trying to catch the falling streamers in his mouth, and several had fallen upon his head.

“Twenty seconds,” the Sledge announced.

The Sledge turned and looked at me. “I made a difference?”

“You did,” I said.

“Bye Sledgie! Bye everyone!” Donut called.

Juice Box: I will be leaving approximately 10 seconds after everyone else.

Carl: Wait, what the fuck? Where are you? Where are you going? You’re not transferring to the 12th?

Juice Box: Oh, I’m going to the 12th floor all right. But Justice Light and I are taking the long way. It’s okay, Carl. Trust me. You’ll like this one.

I gave one last cursory glance around me. Mordecai was here, too. He would not transfer with the *Zerzura*, and he held little Ruby in his arms, who would.

“It’s for the best, little one,” he said.

“Finished” A dwarf cried to my left. I turned to see he had finished building the statue that had broken in front of the castle.

The statue was of a dwarf. A goddess. Ysalte. The Vinegar Bitch. I remembered, now. She was the now-dead goddess of this place. Of

Larracos. Paz had killed her during that fight at the end of the previous floor.

In the moment before everything flashed and disappeared, my eyes focused on the giant axe—the giant *pickaxe*—over the goddess's shoulder.

There was a long pause, and then the messages came.

System Message: Both Warlords Ferdinand and Juice Box have left the realm. Under the current ruleset, they have abandoned their posts and have forfeited their position.

System Message: Team Retribution has been defeated.

System Message: The Princess Posse has won Faction Wars.

Congratulations, Champions.

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8 MINUTES UNTIL THE DESTRUCTION OF THE 9TH FLOOR.

“Okay,” I said to Samantha. Sweat poured down the side of my head. “The moment he grabs you, just answer his questions. Tell the truth. Lie. I don’t care.” I indicated the xistera on my arm. “I will try to get you back, but I can’t if he’s actually touching you. Maybe try to get him to throw you in the volcano or something.” The moment I dropped the xistera off my arm, she would get teleported back to us, but as we knew all too well, bringing her back to me was a really dangerous thing to do.

But if I didn’t bring her back, and she wasn’t in a saferoom before Donut and I left the floor, we’d lose her. We’d never see her again.

“I will ask you if he’s touching you. You will answer, and you will tell the truth. Got it?”

“I thought you told me to lie,” Samantha said.

“No, no. You know what I mean. Tell the truth. And don’t bring him back here!”

“Got it,” Samantha said. She’d wrapped several of the streamers around her head.

Above, Prepotente floated. He pointed in a direction. The god was waiting exactly where I figured he’d be. In the volcano. I aimed, and I fired, arcing Samantha up and out of Larracos.

It would take a few minutes for her to make the journey.

Prepotente: That looks like a good throw, Carl. Yes, he sees her. He's moving to catch her, I think. The streamers were a nice touch. I am now entering the stairwell. Good luck to you all.

Carl: Thank you, Prepotente. See you on the next floor.

Prepotente: I love you.

Carl: Uh, love you too, buddy.

Larracos was gone. All that was left now was a massive pit. A few saferooms remained, just doorways against the sloped pit of Larracos, including one, thankfully, at the very bottom.

Where the castle used to be, there was a bed of roots as thick as elephant trunks.

They were old and dead, and they turned to mulch the moment we touched them. They seemed to be covering a giant hole, and I wondered what would happen if I just walked out onto the roots. Would I fall? Would I fall all the way to the land of the gods?

The massive dwarven digger was gone, leaving a dark hole. That was good. Our guys would have that thing on the 12th floor.

Several stairwells to the 10th floor filled the area, and the remaining crawlers were streaming into them as quickly as they could.

Florin had talked Lucia Mar into partying with him. He said she'd agreed to take a deal, but she'd been sketchy.

None of us believed she actually would. And as a result, he would not take one, either.

Tran went into the stairwell, as did so many others, including Zhang, who went in alone. I'd asked him if he was going to take a deal, and he said he didn't know. Li Na remained partied with him, but she hadn't spoken to him at all. She, too, had gone into the stairwell without saying a word.

Jurgen stopped by and gave me a kiss on both cheeks before he left. Osvaldo and his team went in. Britney said she was contemplating a deal, but was afraid and would probably be back. She went in with Chris. Tuba and Selvi, the party members of the dead Burcu, left. They both said they were taking a deal. Neither had told me the why or how Burcu considered me as the one who'd killed her father, and I feared I'd never know.

That's the problem with such chaos. You lose so much around the edges.

The moment I thought that, I thought I heard a distant laughing deep, deep in the back of my mind, and it terrified me because it came from

within the river. The river I had hoped would leave with the destruction of the ring. The laughter sounded distinctly like that of Eris, the goddess of chaos.

“Jamal is very excited about this,” Jamal said, bouncing up and down on his new—and final—set of legs. He’d remained in the saferoom during the *Zerzura*, and he was one of the few NPCs who’d decided to stay with us. It was him, most of the surviving sluggalos, the strippers, and a handful of former crawlers, including Rosetta, Tipid—who didn’t have a choice for the moment—along with several others. “I would very much like to see a goddess like Eileithya. I have heard she is quite beautiful. But not as beautiful as her retainer, Yemaya. Do you think she will come as well?”

Yemaya was the goddess who looked like the Starbucks logo. “No,” I said. “And get back to the saferoom. Things might happen fast, and if you’re not in there, you’ll get stuck here.”

“And if you and Donut both die, that saferoom will go away, and Jamal would get smushed. I would very much like to stay outside for the moment.”

“Okay. But stay near the door.”

“Jamal will stand in the shade. It is getting quite toasty indeed.”

“Juice Box left me,” Louis said, coming to sit down in the tent. He still had his hand wrapped around his own throat, as if he was afraid the rebreather would choke him. He was constantly spraying water out his new gills. “She gave me divorce papers.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad Samantha isn’t here. She would probably say something very inappropriate right now,” Donut said. “Now get into the stairwell, Louis. There’s nothing more you can do here.”

“No way,” Louis said. “I gotta say goodbye to Katia.”

In the tent standing watch over Katia was me, Donut, Elle, Imani, and Louis. Edgar went to the 12th floor. Bucket Boy was in the saferoom with the rest of the strippers. Mongo had freaked out when Tina and Kiwi and the new babies had disappeared, but we’d coaxed him into his carrier. Rend as well.

Bautista had disappeared. I searched him out, and he’d gone into the safe room. I didn’t know where he was now, but I sent him a message telling him he was running out of time.

Bautista: Sorry. I’m doing something in the crafting room quickly. I’m coming.

Carl: She's about to wake up.

"He's gone. He's not dead, because he's in my goddamn chat, but he's gone," Rosetta said, entering the tent. She was talking about Justice Light, who'd disappeared with Juice Box. She was talking to Victory, who strolled in with her.

"Perhaps you should have watched him better," Victory said. "He built a trans-dimensional trap right underneath your castle, and you didn't even notice because he decorated it with regular traps."

"It is kind of a disappointment that we never got to use that whole tunnel of traps after all that work," Donut said. "Like it was all built up, and nobody ever got to the throne room to find out it was actually directly below, and they had to go through this whole Home Alone house thing to really get to it. People don't like being teased with stuff that never happens. Like with Carl's Christmas present he still hasn't opened, or my berserker spell. I hope it doesn't hurt my numbers too much."

I grunted. "Something tells me while he was willing to use the traps that way, he has something much bigger up his sleeve. And I'm waiting to open the present for a time when I really, really need it."

"It's a pair of romance novels, Carl. And it got all built up, and now you'll be nothing but disappointed when you open it."

I laughed.

"Wait, what the heck is a trans-dimensional trap anyway?" Donut asked. "Goodness it's getting hot. And not that I'm complaining, because you're rather pleasant for an orc, but why are you even still here, Baroness Victory?"

"It's a trap that affects more than one place at a time. At least here in the dungeon," I said.

"I am here because I am waiting to be onboarded onto the Syndicate's new temporary forward headquarters on the surface of the planet since the ship got shot down," Victory said.

"You're not going to the 18th floor with the rest of the adjutants?" I asked.

"No," she said. She straightened. "With the unfortunate death of my underage nieces and nephews up in orbit, I once again became eligible for political office. Not allowed to be in office if you have underage leaders in your family. It's an old, stupid rule, but a rule nonetheless. Anyway, as people weren't certain of former Prime Minister Fopsy's relationship to the

Dream, he was passed over for the newly-vacated position of Syndicate Prime Minister. As a result, I am now acting Prime Minister Victory. There will be a real vote in a few months, but in the meantime, I'm it. They wanted someone stuck here with the rest of us so I could truly focus on the crisis."

"Well, shit," I said.

"Yes," Rosetta said, sounding strangely irritated at the news. "Well shit, indeed."

"Wait, does that mean you can stop all this and get us out of here?" Donut asked. She gasped. "Carl, we know a prime minister!"

"It's only temporary," Victory said. "And even if it wasn't, it wouldn't matter. I have less power now than I did when I was a judge. The council is just as bad as the Lemig Sortion these days. It's total gridlock."

I casually stepped forward, and I put my hand on her shoulder. I felt the softness to her physical form. She was still protected. If I tried to punch her, my arm would go straight through. "I wish you good luck in your new job, madam Prime Minister."

As much as I loathed the idea of killing another few thousand schmucks who'd gotten railroaded into coming down here for the crawl, as much as I actually liked Victory, I wouldn't hesitate. Not even for a moment, to kill the goddamn prime minister of the Syndicate.

She snorted. She knew it, too.

"Everyone be quiet!" Donut shouted. "She's waking up!"

I kept a nervous watch on the clock. Samantha would have gotten to Emberus by now. Hopefully she would stall him as long as possible.

Carl: Tell us the moment he's done with you.

Samantha: HE'S JUST HOLDING ME AND CRYING. YOUR GOD IS A LITTLE BITCH, CARL. MAYBE IT'S GOOD I HELPED KILL OFF HIS BLOODLINE.

Carl: Don't fucking say that out loud.

On the table, Katia woke up.

System Message: Eileithya has entered the realm.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary effect from Eileithya: All damage you strike against female opponents is quartered. All female members of your party strike with a melee power of 500%. Girl power, bitches!

Next to me, Donut gasped at the sight of the human-sized goddess, standing in the tent.

The last time we'd seen her, she'd been in the form of Huanxin Jinx, the grixist. But now she took on the goddess's true form, which we hadn't yet seen. She was a large, humanoid woman wearing flowers in her hair and white and gold robes. Her olive skin, dark eyes, and dark, curly hair were all human, but her lower face was not, which was surprising to me, considering the Greek nature of her name. Her appearance was kind, despite the distinctly alien, almost nullian-like half of her face. She appeared to have four breasts, but it was hard to tell upon her pillowy, voluptuous body. She wore sandals, and each foot only held three toes. She only had three fingers about each hand.

Goddess of Childbirth and Female Pain Eileithyia. Level 250.

Sponsored by Huanxin Jinx of the Grixist Swarm, CEO of Icon Industries.

Warning: This is a deity. She is invulnerable on this floor.

This goddess has been temporarily summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

The description and the temporary effect was the same as the last time we'd seen her, all those days ago in the cemetery in Cuba.

She was described as kind and gentle, and her true form relayed that perfectly.

The goddess snorted with derision. "You fucking, idiotic pricks should have done this days ago. Katia, get up and let's go. The whole court is in a tizzy about that city you fools just teleported in. It splattered an entire convent of Resheph's nuns, and he is losing his mind. And now all those zombies are wandering all over the place and fucking Odette has taken control of them because she's already taken out Inpewt, and it's a big mess and the games haven't even started yet. We have a lot of work to do."

"Hello, Huanxin," Victory said from her spot next to the table.

The timer on Emberus was about to expire, but I prayed Samantha was giving us more time.

The goddess snorted. "Victory. How many cocks did you have to suck to get that job? And I'm sure it's just an unfortunate coincidence your underage nephew was blown out of orbit. Now that idiot the Maestro is the king, and you're Prime Minister. Well, don't get used to it. With all the

death and chaos your little team has caused, it's not going to matter who's in charge. They'll have your head on a pike in no time."

"Wait," Donut said. "Carl, did you hear that? The Maestro is the king?"

"Maybe," Huanxin said with a laugh. "The fate of his sister is unknown, but he's already claiming the crown."

Victory grunted. "Aren't half your holdings with the mantids?"

"What's it to you?"

"The newest mantis colony system just went dark," she said. "The same moment that other rottweiler died a few hours back. We're still not sure what's going on there, but initial reports are a little more holistic than they were in the Aryl system. The system's star went nova."

"You're a lying bitch," Huanxin said. She laughed. "And even if you aren't, I have insurance."

"Wow, you're certainly pleasant," Donut said. "Are you planning on just being this miserable all the time? Because I'm afraid that's not going to work for our Katia. She doesn't work well with high-strung people."

"Don't tempt me, you little rat. I'm saving your ass, and I'm already irritated at everything that's happened so far."

Bautista burst into the room, and we all tensed. I'd been expecting him to come, to do something stupid. But he walked in holding several strange devices in his arms.

"I got them done," he said.

"Oh, Daniel," Katia said, speaking for the first time. "I didn't think you knew."

"Oh course I knew," he said. "I love you. I'm sorry I made you doubt me."

In the distance, the ground shook.

Samantha: MAN, THIS GUY DOES NOT HANDLE BAD NEWS VERY WELL.

Carl: Goddamnit Samantha, we need time!

"Come on Katia," Huanxin said.

"You know, Carl and I were just talking about this earlier," Donut said. "About how reusing jokes and insults and spells can sometimes be a little boring. And I don't disagree. But sometimes, the classics are classics for a reason. Don't you think?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Huanxin asked. "Damn it, Katia. I can't take you until you make a choice. It doesn't matter what you pick."

Just pick one.”

Right now Katia had three choices floating in her vision. The first would cause her constitution to get extremely powerful. The second would allow her to become a celestial attendant. The third would cause her to get pregnant. Ultimately the choice was up to the goddess, but Katia had to pick one before Eileithyia could whisk her away.

“Choose already. Choose or I will kill the cat and Carl.”

“Huanxin, Darling,” Donut said. “Actually, I have a better idea.”

Bubbles were already appearing behind the goddess as Donut cast her level-15, now enhanced to level-16, *Laundry Day*.

“You dare?” Huanxin began before she was violently ripped from the soul armor of the goddess.

Eileithyia remained standing in the room as Huanxin Jinx hit the floor, sliding. She came to a sputtering stop in a large circle filled with multiple words of power.

“You idiots,” Huanxin cried as numerous shields suddenly appeared around the heiress. She wore nothing but a long, white undershirt. The CEO shook with rage. She clicked a ring on her finger, but nothing happened.

“See those words you’re standing on,” I said, indicating the floor. “That was a last-minute addition. You can’t teleport away while you’re standing on that. Your tech shields will work, yes, but no magic will.”

“And do you see my new knee pads? Aren’t they lovely?” Donut asked. “They’re a celestial item I got from Katia, but they fit me. I don’t really need this with you, if we’re being perfectly honest. But the Eileithyia boon is a 500% bonus against enemies. And because I’m partied with Carl, his bonus gives me another 500%. I don’t have the same debuff he has because I’m a girl. I’m about to use that bonus against you. I’m not sure if that counts as ironic or not.”

Donut started to stalk in a circle around Huanxin. “I also recently upgraded a skill because of my lovely shawl. It’s not quite at 15 yet, but it’s getting there. Wanna know what it is?”

The grixist continued to shake with rage. “Stay the hells away from me. I am a god. I will end you.”

Donut moved like lightning, so fast I couldn’t see. One moment she was on one side of the circle, and the next, she was on the other. Sparks flew in the air.

Huanxin, who’d pulled herself to her feet, was again on the ground.

“All cats have it, naturally. It’s called *Claw*. I was at level 4 before, but now I’m approaching 15.”

The shields around Huanxin were now just simply gone.

“But again,” Donut continued, “That wasn’t necessary. I’m just showing off a little.”

“Goddess. Do something,” Huanxin said to Eileithya, who now just stood there.

“She can’t move until Katia makes her choice,” Victory said. “It’s a little quirk of the system. She’s not even seeing this, I don’t think. See, normally the goddess won’t even appear until Katia makes the selection, but when she’s sponsored, it changes. There’re lots of odd rules like this that cause these little game glitches.”

A strange device appeared on Donut’s back. This was from the gold benefactor box she’d received from the Apothecary. A simple gift, but the implication was clear.

Quadruped weapon mount.

“The scorpion’s bite.”

Non-magical bandolier accessory. Allows for the mounting of multiple ranged weapons. May fire and load via inventory action.

Katia’s crossbow formed on Donut’s back, attached to the mount. **Enchanted Repeating Crossbow of the Scavenger Mother of Mothers.** The large, deadly crossbow was bigger than Donut, and it formed with an ominous *click*. It wasn’t loaded.

Donut held the heavy weight of it all just fine. She continued her stalk around the circle.

Donut’s movements were mesmerizing. She was weaving a new charisma-based skill that terrified the enemy. The more terrified they were, the more experience points she received. It was called **Monologue**. It was something called a natural benefit. One of several benefits crawlers received when their boosted stats topped 300.

Donut flowed like liquid across the floor. The shining light from her tiara added to the effect. “Unfortunately, the crossbow isn’t as strong as it could be because I don’t have any women in my party, but again, that doesn’t matter.” She made a small, amused noise. “By the way, I know we’re in a hurry. But we have a mutual friend waiting outside. He’d love to come say hello real quick before you leave.”

And that’s when Mordecai walked into the tent.

“Mordecai here has a bit of history with you, doesn’t he?” Donut asked. “He hasn’t told us the whole story, but we know enough.”

“You’re a non-combatant NPC,” Huanxin hissed at Mordecai as she pulled herself up. She held her arm, which dripped blood. “You can’t touch me. You can’t fucking touch me.”

“No, I can’t. Not directly,” Mordecai said. He held something up. It was a simple crossbow bolt. There was nothing magical about it. “You see this?” He flicked the tip. “My brother died because of you and because of Odette and because of Chaco. But mostly because of you. Some of my mother’s ashes are built into the tip of this bolt. It’s a funeral rite in my culture. To make a weapon with the ashes of those you lost. My mother died before the crawl came to my world, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to allow her to avenge her son.”

Mordecai turned his attention to Katia. “Goodbye, Katia. Be safe, kid.”

He loaded the bolt into the crossbow on Donut’s back, turned, and he walked from the tent.

“I am here to save you,” Huanxin hissed. “This was a problem *you* created, and *I* gave you a solution.”

“Typical,” Donut said, still stalking in a circle around the trapped woman. “We were in trouble, yes. And you sold us a solution, yes. But you’re just like everyone else. You weren’t trying to help my friend. No, you fucking bitch. You were exploiting her.”

“Oh boo fucking hoo,” Huanxin spit. “You think you can beat us? We are gods! Let me go free, and I will forget everything.”

“Again,” Donut said, continuing her slow, panther-like stalk in circles around Huanxin. “We don’t really need to go through all this. But we want to. We want to show those of you on the 12th floor what’s coming. You’re strong, yes. But we are getting stronger every day. And you know what? We don’t need to kill the gods and goddesses to win. No, honey...”

The crossbow on her back fired, and the bolt slammed right between the multiple sets of eyes of the alien.

Huaxin Jinx, CEO of Icon industries rocketed backwards, slid across the floor, and came to a rest at Victory’s feet, dead.

“...We just need to kill *you*.”

Samantha: OKAY, CARL I TOLD HIM EVERYTHING I KNOW BUT NOW HE’S REALLY MAD. I SAID I AGREED TO HELP BECAUSE THE DOGGIE WOULD GO TO THE NOTHING BUT I

DON'T REALLY KNOW WHO THE GUY IN THE HOODIE WAS, AND NOW HE'S LIKE, SUPER MAD. THE VOLCANO THING IS ABOUT TO ERUPT AGAIN I THINK.

"We gotta hurry," I said as I rushed forward. I tried to pull her body into my inventory, and it wouldn't let me. "Donut, permission to loot!"

"Oh, sorry," she said.

I picked up the body, and I took it. We didn't want Eileithya to get too upset.

"You know, this freezing the god thing is a hell of an exploit," I said.

"It has been around for a long time," Victory said. "It's hard to get it right, though. First you need a choice option, and then you need it to be a sponsored god. The choice expires after a couple of minutes, so Katia needs to get moving. And now all the sponsors are going to be wary. Okay, team. They are calling me away. I'm sure we'll speak soon. I'm about to get yelled at for allowing the murder of another CEO. It was all within the rules, but they won't care. Congratulations on your victory."

"Yeah," I said as Baroness Victory, now Prime Minister Victory disappeared for the last time.

The world rumbled.

"Shit, guys," Elle said. "That was pretty damn intense."

"Everyone, give me a hug. Quick," Katia said. "I have to make a choice. It's beeping at me."

And we did. We all hugged Katia, one by one. I still had the xistera extension on my arm, and it was awkward, but I managed. Donut jumped on her lap.

"That was pretty wild," Louis said, blowing water on her.

Katia rubbed her eyes. "All of you. Finish this for me."

Elle hovered over her. "Damnit, kiddo. Don't make me cry."

Imani also hugged Katia. "Be safe."

"Every day something bad happens," Donut said from Katia's lap. "I want to think this is going to be a good thing, but I am so scared I'm never going to see you again."

Katia reached down and kissed Donut on the forehead. "You keep him safe. And now I have to press the button."

We met eyes for the briefest moment, and I nodded.

Katia made her choice.

An instant later, the goddess moved, not even realizing she'd been frozen. She looked, confused at the bubbles still on her arms. And then she saw Katia, gasped, and moved straight to her. The goddess put her hand on Katia's cheek.

"I know you," Eileithyia said as she touched Katia. "You have always been one of my own, as are all who've been touched by the stillness. I wish peace upon you, daughter. You have made a boon choice. Are you sure of your preference?"

Katia sat up straight in the bed. She tentatively reached up, and she grasped the hand against her cheek. She looked the goddess in the eye. "Please, goddess. Please." She took a breath.

"I wish to be made pregnant."

Eileithyia cocked her head to the side. "Are you certain? This is a hard, cruel world you have found yourself in, and as a woman with gift, your challenges will be even greater. If you come to assist me and Yemaya in my court, I promise you will be kept safe. I sense the strength in you, and you would be welcome."

"The rules of this world are strange," Katia said. "If I am pregnant, I get sent somewhere else. There are no children or pregnant women allowed here in this place. At least not of my kind. But there are several children, up there," Katia said, pointing upward. "And they are mostly alone. I think they're in trouble. They all need help, and this is the only way I can get to them."

Eileithyia hesitantly looked upward and stared up into the sky. "I... I sense them," she said, her voice full of wonder. "I sense that place. Strange. There are so many of my daughters there, all alone and afraid. Why couldn't I sense them until now? I... I can't reach them. What is that place?"

"You can't get there," Donut said. "But Katia can, and she can protect them for you."

Eileithyia nodded. "That is wisdom, champion of Nekhebit, harbinger of doom."

"Uh, yeah," Donut said.

The goddess turned to Katia. "You will be made human once again. And you must choose a father for the child. The father must be human as well." The goddess looked at me, eyes blazing. "I see who you wish for it to be, but it cannot be so." Standing next to me, Bautista stiffened.

Katia looked uncertain. "Louis. Would you be willing?"

“Uh,” Louis said. He reached up and touched his neck. “Am I still human?”

“That’s actually a good question,” Donut muttered. “The last thing Katia needs is a baby with flippers.”

Eileithyia smiled, and she put her hand on Louis’s hand. “Of course you are. And a good soul at that.”

“Then sure, I guess. I mean, if she’ll have me.”

“Of course, Louis,” Katia said.

“Then it will be so,” Eileithyia said. She reached down, gently pushing Katia back into the cot. She put her hand on Katia’s stomach. “First, you will be made human again.”

And then Katia started to change. She grew smaller, and smaller. Her blonde hair turned black. Her frame shrank. Next to me, Donut shouted.

“Katia!” Donut gasped, leaping forward. We all rushed to her.

Her entire right arm was gone, all the way to the shoulder. Her left leg was gone. Her right leg was gone up to the knee. She was missing an ear as well.

Katia smiled sadly from the bed. “Just a few things I’ve lost along the way.”

I remembered when she’d lost the ends of her fingers on her hand, all the way back on the Iron Tangle.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“How could you? We’ve all become experts at hiding what we’ve really lost.”

“Here, quick,” Bautista said, quickly bringing the cybernetic parts to her. She’d made them herself, in anticipation of this. She’d left them in the crafting room, and Bautista had finished them for her. We all worked, clicking and fastening them into place just as Eileithyia, ignoring all this, placed her three-fingered hand on Katia’s stomach.

. “It is done. It will be a boy.”

“Spoilers,” Louis muttered.

We all backed up, and the word **Ineligible** appeared over Katia’s head.

“Bye, guys,” Katia said. She raised her cybernetic, right arm and waved.

And then, just like that, Katia Grimmsdottir... Art Professor. Crawler. Hero. Human. Friend.

Mother.

...disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Bye, Katia,” Donut said sadly.

Eileithya nodded, and then she, too, faded away.

The Scavenger’s Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades.

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SAMANTHA: HE'S NOT TOUCHING ME ANYMORE. BRING ME BACK! BRING ME BACK!

I dropped the xistera, and Samantha clunked to the ground, heavy and smoking. If I thought she'd been burned before, this was ten times worse. I barely recognized her.

"Okay, that was pretty wild. He was going to eat me, but I had him throw me in a volcano like you said. He's blowing up the world now, so, yeah we should probably go."

Warning: Emberus will destroy the 9th floor in three minutes.

On the table remained a pair of items. One was Katia's card from the previous floor. The one depicting Annie the skull-headed bird. Donut took it.

The second was a bra. A bra with my own face on one cup, and the words "Time to pay the daddy tax!" on the other.

"What the fuck, Carl?" Elle asked. She whipped down and took it.

I was assuming Katia had gotten that on the *Dungeon Sidekicks* show, so long ago. She'd left it on the table as a joke.

"You know," Donut said after a moment.. "I feel really bad about pooping in Mordecai's mother's ashes now. Do you think any of it got into the tip thing? I'm never going to not think of that now when I think of Huanxin. It was supposed to be this big, grand gesture, but she was really killed by a cat poop arrow."

“Don’t you dare say that to Mordecai,” I said.

“Has anyone noticed that it’s like, really, really hot?” Elle asked.

“Yeah, guys, time to leave,” Imani said.

“Right behind you,” Louis said. He paused and looked up into the sky. “I really wish I could’ve kept *Party Planner*.”

I grunted. “Remember what you said before? They told you airships wouldn’t be allowed on the next floor anyway. Besides, we have another plane now. Florin stole one, and it’s in the hangar.”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Louis said.

“Oooh, Cousin Louis, I like the upgrades,” Samantha said. She floated up and started blowing in his gills.

“Stop that! It feels really, really weird. But yeah, uh, thanks for letting me use your body.”

“And now I get to use yours. Fair trade, no?”

Donut was on my shoulder. “Samantha, you look like a piece of popcorn shrimp that has been stuck at the bottom of the oven for two years straight. And be gentle with Louis. He just got a divorce.”

Samantha gasped. “Louis is back on the market?” She started making growling noises at him.

Bautista stopped next to us, interrupting. “I know you think I was going to do something horrible or jealous. I want you to know I almost did. I keep losing family, Carl. It makes me scared, and it makes me angry. And I know I am not considered human anymore, and that is my great shame, especially today. But I would never do anything to hurt a brother like you.”

I clasped him on the shoulder as he, too, turned to the stairwell. He paused. “I looked up the Kimaris figure you have. He’s one of the brothers of Sheol. He has a summoning time of ‘the remainder of the floor.’ Be careful with him.” He entered the stairwell.

“Kimaris!” Samantha asked, zipping away from Louis, who took the opportunity to also dive into the stairwell. “You have Kimmy as a stuffed animal? Give him to me. Give him now!”

“Who is he to you?” I asked. “I know he’s not your ex-boyfriend. That was King Blaine.”

“He’s one of my best friends. I met him when...” She paused. “Huh,” she said. “That’s weird. Why couldn’t I remember that? He’s... He’s the one who gave me the potion that would put my baby in me when I couldn’t get pregnant. We were friends. He’d give me advice on who to date, who to see

and who to..." She floated off, muttering. She gasped. "His mother! I will kill *his* mother!"

She moved back to the saferoom, leaving a black, charred smear over the door.

Mordecai remained outside, just sitting in the dirt, staring upward. He'd gotten a cigarette and a bottle of Crown Royal from somewhere. Dawn was rising, and red comets from the exploding volcano streaked through the air above us. The heat was sweltering. We only had a minute left.

"You better get back in the saferoom," I said.

"I lost so much today," Mordecai replied. He stood and wiped himself off. He threw the bottle, and it crashed through the rotten roots, disappearing. "But I think I gained more. Thank you, Donut, for setting that up."

He stepped toward the door.

"You doing okay?" I asked Donut as we moved to the stairwell.

"I'm going to miss her," she said. "But you know what, Carl?"

"What's that?"

"They are not going to break me. No matter how hard they try."

I reached up, and I gave her a pat.

Together, we walked into the stairwell, leaving the now-empty battlefield of Larracos behind.

There were only two people left on the floor.

One was Emberus, who filled the world with fire.

The second was Justice Light, who'd used a spell to hide his presence. When Juice Box jumped into the Nothing, he had told her he was going with her. He'd lied. He needed to be on this side of the veil to activate the trap.

Juice Box would be fine, if her short time in the Nothing didn't drive her mad. She had a journey ahead of her, but like he told her, if she managed to survive this next part, she would be reborn as the ultimate weapon to end this madness. This war.

Part of him felt bad. All his friends left in the dungeon could possibly suffer because of what he was about to do. Porthus knew the plan. The Apothecary knew the plan. He truly believed the survivors were up to the challenge, but everything was about to get much more complicated.

Most people were about to take deals. Most of the former crawlers were now on their way back to orbit. He took solace in that.

He took one last look around the elaborate system of traps he'd never needed.

And then he turned his attention on the single, small trap that was about to change the course of all history.

Justice Light: I am not sorry. Peace to you all, brothers and sisters.

He took his talon, and he snapped a piece of twine.

System Message: A Legendary Trap has been triggered.

The simple, tiny trap toppled over. This caused two items to fall into the open portal below it. The permanent portal into the Nothing was made from the now-broken, blood-soaked winding box from the Gate of the Feral Gods. The same portal Juice Box had just used to flee the ninth floor.

The items that fell were a bijou fairy trap, along with the thousands of threads that connected the fairies to the 12th floor, and a demon trap, along with the thousands of evicted demons with the power to open a portal back to Sheol, if only they could find something to latch onto.

What happened next was exactly what Justice Light had intended.

He never got to see the next messages.

Still, his last moments were spent envisioning what was happening. Four separate planes—all jumbled and confused—folded and moved together as the unbreakable lines of the bijou fairies tightened, creating a flower pattern before the darkness in the center of it all broke apart.

As the fire engulfed him, finally giving rest to a soul that had been so tired for such a very long time, Justice Light cawed into the air.

System Message: The Bijou Trap has deactivated. All captured Bijou have been freed.

System Message: The Demon Trap has deactivated. All captured evicted demons have been freed.

System Message: The Nothing has been broken.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into The Halls of the Ascendency.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into Sheol.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into Scolopendra's Lair.

System Message: Scolopendra stirs.

Planetwide Message: It is advised all current guests at the Scolopendra Club evacuate immediately.

Planetwide Message: Oh, I'm sorry. There's nowhere for you to go?

Planetwide Message: Be advised that the 16th Floor, supposedly entitled "Agony of Mirrors" is actually a giant, empty room with a single mirror in it: a non-magical mirror plucked from an abandoned Motel 6 location in Boise, Idaho. As this 16th floor is currently outside the Scolopendra layers, any guests who wish to evacuate the Scolopendra Club should immediately proceed to this location, where you will be safe from any impending attacks. Unfortunately, the 17th floor, called "The Backstage Death Maze" is currently built and running. You will have to proceed through this level should you want to get to the 16th.

Good luck.

System Message: Scolopendra has awakened.

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EPILOGUE

York.

My duty is done.

I have killed those I have been ordered to kill.

The blood on my mandibles will never wash away.

“NO, NO,” THE TENODERA SAID, CRUMPLING THE VERSE AND TOSSING IT into the recycler. It didn’t take an empath to know the poem sucked.

Homecoming Queen creaked and groaned from its spot in orbit. The ship felt haunted, and York, the sole, living creature left on board was the ship’s ghost. Some days, he’d turn off the artificial gravity and just float in the storage hold with his eyes closed and pretend he truly was non-corporeal.

He’d force himself to think in verse. He’d compose poems about better times. About peace spreading through the galaxy.

He’d compose three-beats about his hive, back before they were ripped away. Before the Syndicate came and killed them all. Sometimes, if the poems seemed like they’d probably be especially moving, he’d broadcast them over the open band. He’d do it until someone in authority ordered him to stop. And then after, he’d wait, and then he’d start broadcasting again. He’d done it so much, he knew he’d been blocked from the local feed by most of the captains.

That was fine. Not everyone appreciated philosophical ponderings, especially when told in verse.

Or maybe they were just like him, he mused. Someone who once felt things, and now he simply couldn't. Maybe everyone was faking it, putting on this big show of emotion, performing for a set of gods he was pretty certain didn't exist.

Performing because they knew that's what they were supposed to do. Because they knew if the others realized who they really were, how empty they were, that they'd be cast out and left with nowhere to go.

He'd been fully expecting *Homecoming Queen* to have been shot at by now, but nobody had even attempted it. And while the Crest behemoths weren't known for their defenses, this was the largest ship in orbit. It would take a lot of energy to knock it out of the sky.

Homecoming Queen did have armament, however. A lot of it. Though that was a secret, and York had worked hard to keep it that way.

And not only was the ship well-armed, but it had a full complement of enhancement zone guns and beams. Highly regulated, high-energy weapons that would normally only work in the center system. Porthus had ordered them installed.

These weapons were now green across the board, making *Homecoming Queen* likely the strongest ship in orbit. Even the Syndicate security corvettes didn't bother with the enhancement zone weapons. Why would they? They were expensive and took up space and absolutely couldn't be used outside the center system.

The small yacht he'd destroyed—the one filled with children, including the new king of the orcs—had been simply vaporized with an NPB, actually designed for point defense. He'd deployed it when everyone had started shooting at each other, and so far, everyone assumed the orcs had just been caught in the crossfire. The *Homecoming Queen* had appeared to flee the conflict with all the other transports.

I have killed children. Defenseless children who were not yet old enough to ever be responsible for their crimes.

Were they scared?

He kept trying to rearrange it in his mind, desperately attempting to frame it in a way where he felt something, anything about what he'd done.

York mourned his own emotion. Or better yet, his own lack of it.

It was such a strange sensation, to feel bad about not feeling anything.

Did the fact he even recognized this mean it was still there, somewhere deep down?

This was why he continued to write his poetry. There can be beauty in words, twisted just the right way. The correct verse could raise that which was lost.

I should write that down. It's not that deep, I don't think. But maybe I can massage it into something profound.

His own crawl seemed like such a distant memory. His entire hive had entered the dungeon, and he recalled—vaguely recalled—the anger he'd felt at how they'd been picked off one by one. And not just at that, but at the realization that he'd never really fit in. And because of his own individuality, he never was part of a team, despite being part of a hive. And because he was all alone, his flailings against the bureaucratic, alien machines that had subjugated him and his hive were impotent.

The stronger he grew as a crawler, the weaker he felt. And the weaker he felt, the angrier he became.

And then, somewhere around the 9th floor, a numbness spread. He knew this was something locked deep in his tenodera DNA. His warrior ancestors had been specifically bred to be without emotion. This was before they'd all become civilized, before all their wars were fought with tanks and bombs and drones, the military hardware substituting for the chemicals their queens of old would drill into their brains.

This lack of emotion would be required of any soldier whose duty it was to crack into an enemy hive and kill all the children within.

Before they'd onboarded onto Faction Wars, leaving York all alone to watch over and fly the starship, Rosetta had point-blank asked York if he'd have the fortitude to complete this little side mission. To kill the orc yacht filled with children. They didn't know the hollowness inside York. All they saw was the constant poetry, and as a result, they assumed he had grown weak.

He'd insisted he'd be able to do it. He was careful to make himself appear a little reticent. But the truth was, he'd looked forward to it. He wanted to be the one to press the button, to watch the small ship explode. He wanted to do it because he wanted to feel something afterward.

It hadn't worked.

The news feeds had mentioned the unfortunate death of the children, caught in the crossfire. But there was just so much more happening all at once that it barely registered a blip.

Was that it? That this wasn't enough to break through the bindings that had grown around his heart like thorns?

The news was focused on much bigger stories. The new Prime Minister. The crash of the Dream cruiser onto the surface of Earth over the continent of Australia. The mass suicide of one of the Nebular colonies.

But mostly, at this moment, the talk was of the Mantis system that had simply gone boom.

This particular news actually filled York with a strange, empty sense of satisfaction. The larger mantids hated his race, the tenodera. They were similar, but York and his kind were much smaller physically. Flightless. And not nearly as aggressive and violent. Most mantids openly spoke of exterminating him and his kind, as they could crossbreed, and they feared what would happen should the tenodera mix en masse.

"That's what you deserved," he muttered, trying the words out even though he didn't really feel them. He re-watched the story of the destruction of Hive Re-Population Center 51, which was not even close to the original mantis system. It was the least populated and newest of their multiple colonies. Still... stars didn't usually just randomly go nova without warning. People were starting to panic.

A message came across his screen. **You have soldiers to load. They have arrived at the onboarding facility. Docking procedures incoming.**

The docking computer on the station fed the *Homecoming Queen* the proper vectors. The ship shuddered as the orbital positioning engines rumbled to life.

As they drifted toward the small facility, York took out his pen and wrote a new poem.

When they think it's over.

When they think they are safe.

That's when the hidden danger presents itself.

"Hmm," he said. He was pretty sure this poem was as terrible as they all were. Still, he stuck it up on the console. Why not?

A direct message request came in.

York clicked the radio. "Boomer?"

The grizzled elf appeared on the screen. Even with the low-resolution display, York could see the elf had aged.

“Bring her in nice and easy, bug boy. Any trouble while we were away?”

“Not so much as a single missile shot at us,” York replied. “Embargo is still in effect, so we can’t leave yet.”

“Write any new poems?”

“Several.”

“Any good?”

This was an ongoing conversation between York and Boomer. The old elf seemed to think all poetry was without merit. Still, the ribbing was good-natured, and York pretended to enjoy it. He’d like to think it was something he really would enjoy, if things had turned out differently. He played along.

“All my poetry is good, Boomer.”

“Well, I have a poem for you, my mantis friend. It’s based on the style of a popular Earth poem.”

“I am not a mantis. But that is of interest to me. I have been reading of those as well and have been attempting different kinds. Is it a haiku? A sonnet? A limerick?”

Boomer grinned at him over the display. “Roses are red. Violets are blue. We won Faction Wars. Now we get to kill more of them.”

“That is a terrible poem, Boomer.”

“You have no sense of humor, my boy. Now hurry up and dock. Phase two is about to begin, and it’s about to get really, really bumpy. But the good news is, we made some friends down there, and this next part isn’t going to be nearly as difficult as we originally thought. Are the breaching suits ready?”

On the news feed screen, a Breaking News banner appeared, followed by the image of Porthus sitting behind a desk. York knew this video was actually shot a while ago because he’d been there when Rosetta directed it. But it was timed to be released just now. On the screen, Porthus was announcing the formation of a new militant group. He was warning that they would now be moving against all Syndicate governmental properties and systems across the known universe. The government had until the end of the current crawl to agree to their demands, which basically boiled down to, “stop the crawl or else.”

York clicked a button. “Not only are the breaching suits ready, Boomer. But the enhancement zone suits appear to be online and working, just like Porthus predicted. And the power armor is all online as well.”

“Fuck yeah,” Boomer said, popping a cigar into his mouth. “Set aside four of the Cronus suits and a landing skiff. We have a pregnant veteran on the surface who needs backup. And for the rest of us, it’s time to bring the war out of the dungeon. Better warm up the lasers.”

At that moment, York did, indeed, feel something. Finally, after all this time.

Class: Advocate.

Race: Tenodera.

Birth Race: Tenodera.

Top Level: 71

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the end of the 10th floor.

Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Poetry guild.

Exited the dungeon and spent the following years in self-reflection and contemplation.

Author of the Tenth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist’s Cookbook*.

**Current status: Captain in the newly coined resistance organization,
The Open Intellect Action Network.**

Quest Complete: This is How the Gristle Grinds.

Entering the Outreach Guild.

“Hey pal,” Quasar said. “Been up to anything interesting recently?”

“Fuck,” I said, wheezing. We were in a zero zone. It was just a small cubicle. A table and two chairs, with me on one side and the flickering form of Quasar on the other. The room didn’t have any doors. A cloud of pixelated smoke hovered over Quasar’s head.

It was just me and him. The room was freezing cold.

I coughed. I was covered in ash and blood, and I couldn't stop shaking.

It's done. It's done. We made it.

I closed my eyes, and I just sat there for a moment on the hard, plastic chair. My feet tingled with that waking-up-from-sleep pain. My entire body ached. The eye on my chest ached. I was especially aware of it in a zero zone with everything so heavy.

Quasar, to his credit, gave me a moment.

I opened my eyes to see the small alien man just sitting there. He was wearing a tie with Mongo on it. The dinosaur was constantly waving his little arms.

I grunted with amusement. I put my hand on the table, and it left a black mark.

"All right," I finally said, closing my eyes again. "Let's do this, Quasar."

"Before we start, buddy boy, on behalf of the Syndicate Intergalactic Bar Association, I'd like to personally thank you. There being just about 20,000 crawlers making it to the 10th floor is quite the accomplishment. Lots of my colleagues getting work today, and some of them are pretty easy on the receptors, if you know what I'm saying. As soon as we're done here, I'm going to make a line for the closest attorney bar and drink for free until I wake up in a gutter with at least three new venereal diseases."

I laughed. It felt good to laugh. My eyes remained closed. I could sleep here if I had Donut with me. It felt as if I had a weighted blanket on me. "I'm glad to be of service, Quasar."

He continued. "So, a few formalities. If these were normal circumstances, you'd be meeting me for the first time right now. And I'd probably be saying something like, 'wake your monkey ass up, this is important as fuck.'"

"And I'd probably be saying, 'Go fuck yourself, Quasar. Don't you hear it?'"

"Hear what?"

"The sound of nobody dying. The sound of nobody screaming. Just silence. I could live here, in this room."

"Listen, Carl. You're not going batty on me, are you? I get enough of that at home. I know what you're going through, but I ain't no head shrinker. I get squeamish around crazy, know what I'm saying?"

I opened my eyes. “Do you? Do you know what I’m going through?”

He was silent for a long moment, which was unusual for the attorney.

“Of course not,” Quasar finally said. He patted a folder sitting in front of him. “We gotta go through this.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’m listening.”

He sighed. “As a ‘volunteered’ lawyer for this season, I’ve been tasked with negotiating exit deals with you and two other crawlers. You’re actually my third and final meeting for the day.”

“Anybody else take a deal?” I asked, interrupting. “And who were the other two?”

“Attorney client privilege, buddy. But yes, they both took deals. None of my other clients were anyone in your inner circle.”

“But there are deals being offered? I was kinda thinking they weren’t going to be offering anything.”

“You and me both, but the ol’ system is insisting that everything that happens in here needs to be as by the books as possible.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what are my deals?”

“They’re all shit,” Quasar said. “That, unfortunately, is a side effect of having so many survivors. You’d be better off working as a scrub boy at a bathhouse in a dromedarian leprosy colony. Seriously. You’d think they’d offer the number one crawler some good shizz, but all of these except the last one are straight off the rack. Fifty seasons undead. Desperado Club bomber’s guild with a contingent exit clause that’s almost as bad as that clause your bizarre friend Milk had.” He threw the sheets of paper on the table. “If I wasn’t afraid the AI would turn my asshole into a new wildlife habitat, I’d tell them all to go fuck off. Still, this last one ain’t bad, but we can do better. Apparently, this is Chaco’s last season, and they need a replacement. It is being offered jointly to you and Donut both. You’d have to both agree separately, but they’re indicating this deal will still exist at the end of the 10th floor.”

I laughed. “Can you tell me what this next floor is?”

He nodded. “Actually, I can. If I tell you, however, it adds a full season to any deal you take now or at the end of the floor. But you just got a free one from some quest, so I guess it all evens out.”

“Okay. I consent. Whatever. What do we got?”

“I actually don’t know. Hang on. Those other two guys didn’t even ask.” He picked up a piece of paper.

“Okay. It only gives limited information. The floor is called ‘Don’t Come in Last.’ You and your party leader are given an option to choose a matter of conveyance, either biological or mechanical. You will have to travel from point A to point B, and upon reaching point B, you will be given an upgrade option for your vehicle. You may only travel using the vehicle. You will have to make a fixed number of these journeys, and if you come in last place, the survival containment around your vehicle is removed. There will be multiple NPC teams, so you’re not necessarily competing directly against other crawlers. Which is good because this ain’t a goddamned Battle Royale season. There’s obviously more to it than that, but that’s all they’re giving.”

That’s just fucking peachy, I thought. Katia would have excelled at that.

The thought of her filled me with anxiety. How was she doing? Was she okay? It’d only been minutes, I knew. Would I ever see her again? Would I ever know?

I sighed. “My official answer is, fuck these options. I am not taking a deal.”

“I am shocked,” he said, writing something down.

There was an audible ping.

“I thought maybe you’d also rep Donut,” I said after a moment. “You’ve represented her before for some of the contract stuff.”

He shrugged. “I was hoping so. That’s why I wore this tie. I argued it, but they assigned her another lawyer. Her name is Princess Chandra, Esquire. Apparently her and Donut already had their meeting, and now that you’ve officially declined your offers I can tell you she declined as well. I am hearing there were some serious fireworks during their meeting. And not the good kind. We need to have a serious talk about her. Donut’s lawyer, I mean.”

I grunted. “Why? Is she another catgirl?”

“No. Worse, buddy. She’s your new wife.”

Squirties waystation and refueling platform. Located just outside the main tunnel access route entrance to the Earth system.

Zander sighed. The saccathian let out a stream of air through his tentacles. He started to pull the line of Veriluxx Real Pet Companion toys off the shelf. The Donut and Mongo ones still occasionally sold, but all these others were crap. He had a whole line of Gimli and Geraldo and Skyler Spinach toys that nobody gave a shit about, even when he did have customers. Plus the toys took up a lot of space.

He paused at the Uzi Jesus toy. He kinda liked this one. He tapped it, and it came to life. "Hello. I am Uzi Jesus. You look quite upset. What's the problem, son?"

"I'm ruined," Zander said to the large action figure. "I paid my life savings to lease this spot, and now that there's an embargo, nobody is going through the tunnel gate. I haven't had a refueling customer in days. Not even reporters anymore. And with the threat of war and what happened with the Mantis system and everything else, nobody is even approaching the area. They're terrified, and I have a 25,000 credit a month lease to Dictum I can't pay."

"Dude, that fucking sucks," Robot Uzi Jesus said.

"Yeah," Zander said. "It really does."

He pointed a gun at Zander's shirt. "Are you sure it's not because this waystation has the stupidest name I've ever heard?"

Zander looked down at his uniform. It was a shirt with the Squirties logo on it, which was just his smiling face with all the different types of fuel squirting from his tentacles, each one represented by a different color. Some were gaseous, some were solid, and none of the colors were right, but it was just a cartoon. His mother had designed it. "Waystations always have funny names and logos."

"It's nasty, dude. Look, at least you're not trapped on the other side."

"That's true, I guess." He'd just seen on the news where they were all shooting at each other. Again. The Dream cruiser had crash landed on the planet. A bunch of other ships had crashed as well, and now with that whole thing with the fringe former crawler group mouthing off, there would probably be more shooting soon. He'd seen war before, and it was terrible for business. Especially his kind of business. War fleets didn't buy fuel. They took it.

"Maybe the embargo will get lifted," Zander said hopefully. "Maybe they'll all come through here and buy gas again."

“Maybe, but you’re probably fucked,” Robot Uzi Jesus said. He scratched himself in the head with his plastic gun. It went off with a pop, and he put his hand to his temple. “Dad damnit!” His head turned. “Veriluxx Real Pet Companions does not endorse blasphemy.”

When the action figure moved, he knocked the Raul the crab action figure, who said, “Hello, fine warrior! I am Raul.”

“I’m going to get indentured,” Zander said miserably.

“Do not kowtow. Never kowtow!” Raul called.

“I got it! You could start a church!” Robot Uzi Jesus announced. “You’d be ballin’ if you did it right.”

“What is this?” a new voice asked. She reached over Zander’s shoulder and picked up the Uzi Jesus toy. “Is this an icon of the Earth deity?”

“Don’t look at my dick, lady!” the toy announced.

Zander turned, surprised. He hadn’t received notice anyone had docked. He... he recognized her. She was a tall, elf-like woman with a long neck and naga-like eyes. Strange.

Still, this was a customer. He straightened. “Welcome to Squirties! That’s a fantastic costume. Or is it surgery? ... Oh,” he said, suddenly remembering what had happened. “Are you a fan of Nami? Shame what happened to her. Have you come to the gate to pay your respects?”

“Costume?” the woman asked, holding out her arms. “Are you asking Eris, goddess of chaos if she’s wearing a costume?”

“Uh,” Zander said. “Yes?”

She burst into laughter. “I’ll show you a costume.” She snapped her fingers, and all the tentacles on Zander’s face turned rigid. Each one started spewing a different liquid.

Some of that liquid burned.

“Holy Mary mother of me,” Robot Uzi Jesus said.

AND JUST LIKE THAT...

Yeah, bitches! Another book is DONE!



So... a lot has changed since the last time I wrote one of these things. As of the publication of this, Ace, a division of Penguin Random House, has published books 1-3 in hardcover, and you can get it in stores all over the world. Books 4-6 are forthcoming in 2025. And we have so much more going on, too. The Webtoon comic is coming. The Soundbooth Theater full-cast audio version season 2 is coming (And season one is available on [Soundbooththeater.com](https://www.soundbooththeater.com)). We have a possible adaptation. So much more. (Join my Reddit or Patreon to keep in touch!)

None of this would be possible without you guys and your REVIEWS. Please, please, please leave an honest review. And not just this book, but every damn book you read. But especially this book. If you're reading this, that means you've already done the hard part. The review part is easy!

Finally, in what's becoming a really sucky trend, my best friend Freddie the Labrador died during the final days of writing this book. Freddie was there sitting by my feet while I wrote the vast majority of what you've read so far. Freddie began and ended each day with a furiously wagging tail, even when age made that difficult for him. He was my constant companion since he was a puppy. He was with me through some really dark times, lending his strength, and I am proud to have been there with him when he wagged his last wag. Even in his last moments, he was checking on me to make certain I was okay.

We don't deserve dogs. This world is a little less derpy and a little less amazing with him gone.



Freddie Dinniman 2013-2024

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. He wants everyone to know the story at the end of chapter 34 in *Kaiju: Battlefield Surgeon* is 100% true.



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Merch? You want MERCH? [Okay....](#)

And finally, we have a Spotify playlist where all the songs mentioned in the series can be found in one place. You may find that [here](#).

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